

THE SONG OF
RENNY
MAURICE HEWLETT

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THE
SONG OF RENNY

BY
MAURICE HEWLETT

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DEDICATION

To the Fountain of my long dream,
To the Chalice of all my sorrow,
To the Lamp held up, and the Stream
Of Light that beacons to-morrow ;

To the Bow, the Quiver and Dart,
To the Bridle-rein, to the Yoke
Proudly upborne, to the Heart
On fire, to the Mercy-stroke ;

To Apollo herding his cattle,
To Proserpina grave in Dis ;
To the high Head in the battle,
And the Crown—I consecrate this.

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BOOK I
THE STRIFE FOR THE CROWN



CHAPTER I

EARL GERNULF COMES TO SPEIR

IT used to be said that in the whole county of Pikpoyntz there was not to be found a single tree, but that must have been poet's licence. There was, in fact, a substantial sycamore in the court-yard of Speir, as many condemned wretches, who were hanged upon it, could have testified, and as the inhabitants did not fail to report when the calumny was uttered against them. The Speir sycamore, as the only tree, was likely to be as famous as Speir itself, the only castle, in Pikpoyntz. Pikpoyntz indeed was a barren fief, fruitful only of rocks and stones. It suffered all extremes and knew no mean. Periodically it was raked gaunt by deluges of rain, sodden anew beneath a mantle of snow, parched by frost, bleached under a brief onslaught of a pitiless summer sun. Being, as it were, a series of spikes and valleys, the former withered in heat and the latter lay hidden in fog the greater part of the year's round. Of all its valleys the deepest, the gloomiest, the most drenched in mildew and mist was the Valley of Stones through which raced the brawling Sâr; and of all its peaks the most

terrible was that which threatened the valley and carried on its bare summit the Speir sycamore and the Castle of Speir.

Gunlaw was a white spike standing solitary in the Valley of Stones. Speir was a castle which followed exactly and occupied the whole of its summit. Shale and shingle, the débris of a great river-bed, filled the valley ; mountains and clouds shut the sun from it ; mist hung over and drenched it day after day. At high noon, or for an hour before and after, the sun might look down on the bare bones the river had left, on grey hovels and on the white faces of goitred peasants who crowded in them : but Speir bathed in his light the twelve hours through, so that folk below thought it a battlement of heaven and looked to see the wings of angels tipping the walls.

Once upon a time—in those dim days when Maximilian III. reigned over Jadis, and Sir Prosper le Gai adventured in Morgraunt, as has been related elsewhere—Gernulf de Salas was Lord of Speir and of the whole Valley of Stones. Being, indeed, Earl of Pikpoantz, he was lord of the county ; but he was doubly lord of the Valley of Stones because of his domineering white castle. There, and wherever he went within his lands, he was served fearfully—with knee service only, for there was little else to give him ; but the fact is that he was more often in other counties than his own, and never for any good purpose, if common report may be trusted. He always had a strong force at Cantacute to watch the South and another at Montgrace to keep eyes on Logres and the

North. Behind these he felt himself impregnable ; beyond them, he knew that they would hold the gates for him in case of need. Under these precautions he was seldom at home, and never for long. He would be away for a year at a time, none knowing where. At such times there was no white-barred flag to cow the Valley of Stones. The frontiers were too strait and too well watched. Half a dozen men kept the castle walls ; the great gates only opened to admit the tenantry with their weekly dole. Father Sorges, the old chaplain, let himself in by the postern when he came up daily to say Mass. He braved the six hundred steps of the rock and all the dangers of ice, snow, tempest and (worst of all) fog ; for he was a meek man and would not trouble the door-ward's hours of ease. Inside the great windy house, besides the lacqueys and meaner sort, were only Clotilda the old Housekeeper, Shrike the black Chamberlain, and Nitidis and Blanchmains, Maids of the Hall.

The gardens of Speir stretched across the whole table of the mountain-top, and might be a mile one way and half a mile the other. They were mostly cut in broad terraces, one below another. There were no trees, no flowers : nothing but grass as deep as velvet, yew hedges of immense age, and many fountains. Before the southern front ran a flagged walk edged by a low parapet. Leaning upon this, you could trace the course of the jade-green Sâr set as it was in a broad band of shingle ; you saw the blue valleys, the great grey splinters of the mountains. Upon the eye level

were the snowfields and the lonely pikes. You would be 5000 feet above the river ; almost impregnably secure. If you looked, you would see a white road cross the Sâr and wind three times round Gunlaw, climbing always till it reached the Barbican. That was the pass, and the only pass on that side of the county. No need of a moat at Speir when you had such a way whereon your enemy must needs go at a foot's pace and be in view for the whole of it ; no need of drawbridge, when nobody could live to hail the door-ward unless you had a mind to let him. From the terrace, also, you could see how fine a place Speir was, with its deep-set windows, its corbels and turrets and golden vanes. Looking on it you would share your gaze with the saints, of whom a whole row stretched from end to end, flanking the midmost shrine, a Mary and Jesus under a gilt baldacchin. All those paid court to Speir and turned their backs upon the plagues, the dry bones, the dwarfed shrubs and lean dwellers in the Valley of Stones. On all sides was the sound of water falling ; and sometimes the ravens who nestled in the sycamore wheeled about the vanes and turrets with harsh croakings. So much must suffice (for the moment) for Speir in Pkipoyntz, which, in the great old days of Jadis, Earl Gernulf held of his lord the King by the nominal service of a pair of gerfalcons yearly, in golden hoods, upon a golden cadge.

Now, to Speir came the Earl in haste one frosty autumn morning, scantily attended, as his

custom was, and bringing with him a girl-child set before him on the saddle-bow. She seemed to be some twelve years old ; she neither cried nor showed traces of tears ; neither spoke nor was surprised at anything ; had no fear, and never ceased watching. The great man dismounted in the courtyard and set the child on her feet on the flags. Then he called for Clotilda the housekeeper.

'I am here, my lord,' said she, who had watched him up from the valley. He passed the child over to her.

'She is a dead man's daughter,' he said, and every one knew what that meant. 'Guard her well and let her want for nothing.'

Shrike the black shuddered and clattered his teeth.

'But how is she called, this dead man's daughter ?' cried old Clotilda, with her hands in the air.

'I never stayed to ask,' said the Earl grimly. 'Send for Father Sorges.'

'Father Sorges will never wake the dead, my lord,' says Clotilda, persisting in her own thoughts.

'I want him to sacre the living, old fool,' bit the chill voice of her lord. And no more was to be added.

Father Sorges, the old priest who lived below Speir and climbed six hundred steps every morning to say Mass there, came into the hall, a little lean old man with a hungry mouth and pale, wandering blue eyes. He put a hand on the child's head and looked at her a very long while. She, for her part, stood by the Earl's chair, her hands behind

her back, her soft brown hair falling smoothly over her shoulders and curving inwards as it touched them, her solemn eyes fixed unwinking upon him. The Earl was having his riding-boots pulled off. Dame Clotilda watched the priest, who began the catechism.

‘How were you called, my child, by your parents?’

She answered him stilly, in a voice without a tremor, in a low voice, ‘Sabine.’

Father Sorges struck his forehead. Under his breath, as if fearfully to himself, he whispered, ‘Sabine—a rape! a rape!’ His lips formed like a whistler’s; and Shrike’s eyes bulged from rings of white.

Aloud he said, ‘A Roman name! Were you so christened, my child?’

She bowed her head. The old man turned to his master. ‘I cannot baptize the Lord’s anointed,’ he said. ‘She is God’s already.’

The Earl had been bathing his hand deep in his red beard. He now got up. ‘Shrike, fetch me to eat and to drink,’ he said, and the black fled away to serve him. ‘As for the child, she is mine. Call her what you like among you.’

Father Sorges, with a rapt look beyond his lord, said softly, ‘Then I call her Sabine, as she was named, and take the omen.’

‘Now what in God’s name do you mean by that?’ cried the Earl.

‘My lord,’ said the priest, holding up his hand, ‘she will grow to be more beautiful than a summer’s day, and women must pay for that.’

'When that day comes,' said the Earl, 'she shall pay me,' and trampled down the hall to his meat and drink—to where Blanchmains and Nitidis awaited him.

In that noiseless night of fog there was talk of the little captive princess, who had named herself, and was to be called Donna Sabine. Blanchmains sat up in bed with clasped knees, blinking at the light. She was a white-faced girl with a very red mouth, and narrow eyes which were really yellow, but at night looked all black. Her hair too was black, long and heavy, as straight as if it were wetted. Nitidis had brown hair, gold in the ripples ; she stood now before the glass braiding it. Her gown was made of thin white silk, and her slippers had gold threads in them. Beneath her bosom ran a crossed girdle, also of gold. She was fastening on a crown of red flowers : the glass showed her laughing face all a dimpled rose, and her brown eyes sharp as a mouse's.

'I have heard nothing yet,' said she through lips encumbered with hair-pins.

'You should hear before long,' replied the other in a low bell-voice.

'Yes, very like.'

'Very like?' echoed Blanchmains. 'I don't know the word. You must make it your business, child. How can I calculate without figures? This may be a heavy matter for some of us.'

Nitidis shivered at the shoulders. 'Blanchmains, you would calculate on your death-bed, I do believe.'

‘I would calculate in any bed.’

‘Ah, I am not like that,’ said Nitidis softly, achieving her flower crown. ‘It is a dear child,’ she added.

‘May be dearer than we care for. That you must find out.’

Nitidis had no answer ready, but as she put on her cloak and lighted herself a lamp, one could see by the puckers in her brow that she was troubled. Thinking hurt her ; she sighed.

‘Good-night, Blanchmains,’ said she, stooping to kiss her friend. Blanchmains peered and glimmered. ‘A good night, little rabbit.’ Nitidis went out, robed and crowned ; and Blanchmains lay down to sleep, but tossed and turned about, finding none. In an hour she got up, lit a lamp, and went out in her turn. Down the long corridor she crept, shading her light ; she entered the turret at the end, crept upstairs for a couple of flights, then turned very softly the handle of a door in front of her. She stole into a white-walled room. Sabine was lying asleep in the bed, with her bare arms over the quilt ; her little lips held tightly together, but her eyelids fluttered. Once she sighed deeply. Blanchmains held the lamp up in her thin white hand, and looked sharply at the unconscious child. Her eyes showed a mask of intense black which would have told you nothing. Going by her mouth—full it was and rather long—you would have seen it stretched and judged her anxious. After a time of hard looking she stooped to make certain that the girl slept. Satisfied of this, she set down the lamp, gently pulled back the bed-clothes,

and looked the child over from head to foot. Nothing escaped her, but she was most careful over the hands and feet ; also she felt the texture of her hair, the softness of her skin. Round the loins she found a fine gold chain. This interested Blanchmains vastly ; but it bore no mark of any sort, and had no visible fastening. She stood with one hand at her lower lip watching, judging, as if weighing the worth of the pretty thing lying there. Then she put everything as it had been and turned away—this time to bed and to sleep.

Speir, like an ice-castle, stared up to the frosty stars. The great mist-wreaths rolled over the deep Valley of Stones and brimmed up to the battlements. The sound of noisy Sâr, the tinkling of goat-bells, the coughing of sick sheep, the barking of foxes, the owls' crying—all noises of the night came up hollow and startlingly near through the fog.

CHAPTER II

THE HIGH LITTLE LADY

THE Earl stayed but a short while at Speir. By the third morning after his arrival, before the sun was over the mountain-tops, there was a great array in the Valley of Stones of men, horses, and steel. Then the red Lord of Pikpoyntz rode out of his gates, bareheaded as his use was, thundered down the winding road in front of his clattering staff, flashed his long sword before his array, and was off for some year or more. All that was known certainly was that he had again swept through Cantacute ; therefore he was again for the southern parts. Not a soul in Pikpoyntz had more stuff for judgment than that fact. Nor was it meet that he should. Speir lived by rapine, and no doubt the stones would have cried it out if they could ; but since they could not, it was the Earl's firm policy that no tongued thing should have aught to tongue of. Not a soul in Speir knew where he went or what he did ; not a soul of all those who went with him ever set foot in Speir.

The little Personage left behind him was royally left. By orders which, you may be sure,

did not fail to be explicit she was to want for nothing of all the clothes, all the thousand luxurious necessities and superfluities she could have need or no need of. No more could have been done for the heiress of Pikpoyntz, which Blanchmains was at first tempted to think her. Blanchmains herself and Nitidis were appointed to be her Maids of Honour, Shrike was her chamberlain ; Father Sorges, as spiritual director, was to teach her Latin, the rudiments of religion and the lives of the Saints. The good man liked the task. ‘By the time you return, my lord,’ he had said, chafing his thin hands, ‘she shall have made her first communion.’ Pikpoyntz had then turned upon him like a savage dog. ‘What do you know of my return—you, Sorges?’

Sorges quailed, of course. ‘Ah, nothing, nothing, my lord. I am a poor priest.’

‘Attend to your priesthood then, and leave my return to me,’ grunted the Earl. But Sorges fixed it at some two years, all the same, and was not more than a year out.

In addition to these honours, the little Lady Sabine was assigned a regiment of waiting and dressing women, horses, grooms, dogs ; and two pages, one to wait upon her table, one to follow her whenever she chose to be abroad. Bubo, Clotilda’s nephew, was the first of these : he was a hunchback, and could not ride. The other was a strapping youth of good parentage, called Firmin, reputed to be dumb. This he was not ; but he was dull and slow-witted. Much better born than Bubo, there had been a question of his

place when he first came to Speir ; his parts found their own level ; he was held to be but a finely-made block and sent to the guard-room instead of the hall. His title now was Esquire of the Bridle. Thus, according to the commands of the Earl, was Sabine encompassed, and thus, on bent knees, was she to be served.

So, you may depend upon it, she was served, for Pikpoyntz had a way of making himself felt whether he was at home or abroad. He could strike heavily from a distance, and suddenly. Very early in her career Blanchmains had found that out. A couple of years or so before Donna Sabine was brought into the piece, upon one of her master's absences, she had found the days long and heavy within the thick walls. It was winter-time and the frost filmed the mirrors. She was sick of the loom, she could not look at her own arch face nor watch reflected the passage of her slim hands. She loved her bed dearly, yet she dared not lie in it beyond or before her appointed hours. At Speir everything went by a clock whose ticking was the stern pulse of Pikpoyntz. What was Blanchmains to do ? She fretted, had not yet learned the conditions of Speir.

There was at that time a page in the castle named Leonard, a pretty, conceited boy. He had grown up in the service, and was just now able to see the down on his upper lip if the light were good. The light, however, was not good : the frost filmed the looking-glasses. Now of all things in the world, next to her still self, Miss Blanchmains loved looking-glasses. Since they

were not to be had, she must needs see herself in this boy's fine eyes which, had she let him alone, had mirrored nothing but kitchen-maids, country girls, and other homely toys of a man's idleness. How far she led him, how far he needed to be led, I do not care to guess ; but it is certain that one black February night she kissed him at her door and stood with a torch lighting him down the gallery. Next morning he was found under the castle ramp ; frozen as stiff as a flower-stalk and dead of a cut throat. Father Sorges buried him in a hurry in four feet of ground : nothing was said. Pikpoyntz came home about the middle of March to find Blanchmains' broad tapestry very forward. She had completely finished the Triumph of Love and was immersed in that of Chastity, wherein Love, blindfolded, sits shrieking while his rainbow wings are torn out in handfuls by certain furious virgins. Love in this piece also was complete ; but the virgins still lacked bodies. That night Shrike, in default of a page, served Pikpoyntz with his great two-handed cup at supper. Nothing was said. Yet when my Lord of Pikpoyntz had gone out again, Nitidis pillow'd her face by Blanchmains at night and worked with her by day at the Triumph of Chastity. For page in the hall came Bubo, Clotilda's little crook-backed nephew, with eyes not adapted for mirrors. Firmin was added later, when the lesson was thought to have been learned. The story is quite unimportant, but will serve to explain the fact that little Donna Sabine, a child of twelve, friendless and a waif from none knew where, reigned as

mistress of Speir, was served with earl's honours, sat (half-drowned) in his chair of estate, knelt at his emblazoned fald-stool in the chapel while Mass was saying, and was attended on crooked knees by Shrike and his crew.

At first she was willingly served, for everybody in the place was touched to laughter or tears by her, and either estate makes for tenderness. Father Sorges and the old châtelaine had lived so long in the service of the great that to obey was not only better, it was far easier than sacrifice. If they were to have no master they had rather humiliate themselves before a shadow of him than not at all. This solemn, preoccupied little girl, so soft and yet so desperately grave, drew deep upon the fund of pity they had. She was so small to be so great ! They grew to love her and, good humble souls, being in love, they could not grovel enough. Father Sorges, schooled by his office, did his grovelling mentally : in time, indeed, his interest in the child's soul swallowed up his sense of tears, as his duty of teaching lent him power. Sabine never suspected his abasements. But Dame Clotilda, poor wretch, ruined herself. Whatever Sabine thought about anything she always kept locked behind her firm lips ; but it is evident from what follows that she took the good woman at her own valuation, and would as soon have thought of confiding in a tame rat. The only asperity the mild-mannered child ever showed was to this fawning old hireling, who really loved her.

The other camp at Speir was of those who were quick to contrast the gigantic Earl with his

chubby little viceroy, and to find much scornful entertainment in the exercise. So long as this piqued them all went well ; but pique is very apt to end in mortification or weariness. So it was here : Shrike was mortified and Blanchmains tired to death of serving somebody she could not rule and was ashamed to fear. As for Nitidis, she was a cipher, a rosy rogue bubbling over with vanities, who does not count one way or another. But the first-named couple had mass enough to spoil the comedy which they had been the first to detect.

Shrike, who had a gibing devil in him, attempted to make of the comedy a farce. And so indeed he did, though not as he had planned it. He burlesqued the situation, he postured and mouthed at his service, strutted, played the broad buffoon. Having no real wit and much more malice than vivacity, he overdid his part. Blanchmains might have helped him to sharpen his offence, but just then she was too intent upon watching. The servants, however, would have taken the cue before long and little Sabine's ship foundered in a stormy mock observance but for her own prompt action. The child's mind, through those quiet eyes of hers, read into the black, found out that there was something unfamiliar at the core of him, guessed it unclean. From that hour she ignored him, just as you would ignore a smear on the wall. She looked through him, never at him. It took all the heart out of his attitudes and enabled her to see that she was being made a fool of. She acted at once—it was droll to see Shrike upon the occasion. It was on a day when he chose to play

the abject devotee at her dinner. When he bowed her to her seat his head went down between his knees. He lifted the covers as if he would elevate the Host ; at Sorges' grace he fell flat on his stomach with his forehead on the floor. In handing the cup to his mistress he again plunged on all fours, or near it, with the vessel held over his head. There he had to remain, for Sabine simply let him kneel. He might have cracked his spine for all the notice she took. Tired at last, Shrike had to get up, hot, smarting and stiff. He found that Sabine had got another cup. The meal was making its usual way, nobody so much as smiled when he stood upright. Shrike seethed in shame. One case will do for all : the man was her slave from that time forth ; but she showed another part of her quality in the affair, namely, that she never forgot nor forgave. It is doubtful if she ever saw, certain that she never addressed him again.

This little Sabine was a child so strangely silent, so strangely self-possessed, so deliberate in her aims, and so successful in them, that she was, for all her youth and exuberant beauty, almost grim. Locked behind the door of her rosebud mouth she kept everything in her life which had preceded her advent in the Valley of Stones, when she came thither like booty on the Red Earl's saddle-bow. Who she was, who her parents, what her rearing (save that it had been plainly delicate), what the hopes centred in her high little head, there were none at Speir could find out. All agreed from the first that she was high-born, probably an only

child, greatly beloved. Pikpoyntz himself knew, and she knew, what that day had been—in what colour, what temperature, at what desperate pace it had sped—wherein she was lifted to his saddle and carried—how far from home? how far to Speir? ‘The daughter of a dead man,’ said Pikpoyntz. That gave a spur to thought. Fire and sword, a burning roof; steel for the master, a rope for the servant; and one only snatched alive from the blood and smoke. Plenty to guess! Why snatched at all? Why brought to Speir? Why not rescued, claimed, treated for, ransomed? Plenty to guess!

But she afforded no clues. They never saw her in tears. They listened at her chamber-door, but heard no sound of sobbing. The little head went royally high, the fierce little heart beat stealthily its own counsel. Queen of herself she was, and might well be queen of others, for as time went on she insisted (but without parade of insistence) on queenly observance. None might touch any part of her but her hand with the lips. If you did not bend the knee before her, she looked at you till you did. The Earl’s high table did not suit her case: she must eat apart. A smaller table was brought on to the dais—the dame and Shrike found it there one morning; ever afterwards Sabine ate there alone. The customary civilities of cap-touching and the pulled forelock were discouraged. Every cap must come off when Sabine went out of the house. She would not cover her own head in chapel, and the good Father Sorges was made to understand how

impossible it was to ask it of her. The moment Dame Clotilda and Shrike found out the trend of affairs they helped her all they knew, the dame because she loved play-acting, Shrike because he was writhing for notice. Thus the legend of royal birth began and thus it grew. You may judge if Blanchmains had food for speculation, or Nitidis stuff for the romances which she loved to spin.

When the Earl came back for a night at the end of his time, he found her Queen indeed. Sabine was fourteen and reported ravishing to view.

'Fetch her down,' said Pikpoynz. Sabine refused point-blank to come. This was reported by Shrike in an agony.

'Fetch her down, I said,' repeated his master. She was brought. He surveyed her. 'Splendour of God, what a maid!' He spoke to her with gruff pleasantry, she looked at him without a word. 'Come, come, mistress,' said he, and roared at her; she still looked thoughtfully at him and let him roar. He bellowed, he swore, made to strike her: she did nothing else but as she had done. 'Accursèd race of mules,' cried the Earl, beside himself, 'may the Devil take one and all of you. Go souse!' And he sent her away. When he left next morning, he left her more a queen than ever.

As became a queen, the little girl was terribly alone. It seemed as if no other position was possible to one whose pride congealed her blood, froze dry her alarms and dammed up the well of

her young tears. If she had not chosen isolation it would have chosen her. She had, of course, no equals there, but there were two who would have died to serve her—Dame Clotilda, whom she despised, Sorges, whom she tolerated. Shrike she abhorred and Nitidis she overlooked. As for the other, she kept Blanchmains at arm's length.

But a confidant of some sort a child will have : Sabine dug very deep for hers. She took six months' deliberate survey of her position, then without any fuss made her selection and abided by it. She chose for her friend Firmin the Esquire of the Bridle. The dame lifted up her hands, Father Sorges wiped his weak eyes, Shrike rubbed his head, and Nitidis whispered her brimming confidences at every corner. Blanchmains alone kept a smiling face. Neither looks askance nor open elbow-nudging had any effect. Sabine never saw such things ; they were and were not. When Sorges introduced the subject into his life of Saints Cosmas and Damian she asked him to keep to the point ; when he shrilled too nearly towards it in his Sunday homily she sent for him, and he took no more such flights. She was mostly with Firmin all that summer and autumn. In the winter, when she could not ride, she had the terrace swept clear of snow and walked with him there morning and afternoon for an hour at a time, followed by three stag-hounds and a lame beagle. Periodically the Earl sent her a letter by his secretary to announce his health and inquire after hers. Sabine never opened or read these ; she gave them to Firmin to destroy—and

presumably was obeyed, since Blanchmains was never able to find a trace of them in his quarters or on his person. The whole affair may have been one of innate perversity on the little lady's part ; but I think not. Firmin had his advantages. He was well-born, to begin with ; a good-looking fresh-coloured, strapping young man — sinewy, well-built, a centaur on horseback, a monument of taciturnity at all times. I believe he was not so dull as he seemed ; I believe he found out as quickly as most of them how the land lay, that his little lady had chosen him precisely because he had not chosen her. Of all the household he alone had been stiff—obedient as you please, but stiff. He never offered his service, but never avoided it ; he spoke when she asked him a question, but in the fewest possible words. More, he alone of the whole house could not be made to uncover in her presence. He saluted in military fashion, he raked his cap off for a moment, bowed (awkwardly enough), was quick to obey, and, at times, indubitably ready with his strength and brute courage. He pulled a savage hound off her one day in the winter and broke back its jaws with his pair of hands. He was a marvellous rider, breaker of horses, flier of birds ; he knew the weather like an open book, the country as well as you your drawing-room ; he did in his blunt offhand way the right thing at the right times. But he could not uncover his head and he never proffered any duty. Every one agreed afterwards that just such a fellow as this the perverse little lady would choose, and it had

to be owned that she was justified at the time. Firmin had few manners—but apparently no vices. If he drank, no one knew it; if he was inclined to women, there was no girl to testify. He was handsome and, as they all knew, a gentleman born—some said noble. It had to be added to all this that he took no liberties, never sought confidences, never returned them, but at the same time never betrayed any that were made him. All the advances were Sabine's; when she sent for him he came—what else could he do? When she spoke he answered, when she took his arm he endured it, when she went slowly into the house he went briskly (generally singing) to his quarters. Nitidis and Shrike laughed at him—he watched them sedately. Dame Clotilda and Sorges lectured him in corners—he heard them respectfully. Blanchmains certainly did not laugh at him; and as for lecturing in a corner, she thought the times not ripe.

The consequence of all this was that Sorges embellished the lives of Saints Cosmas and Damian, pointed his homily, and was snubbed for his pains. After the Earl's visit and repulse my Lady Sabine practically spoke to no one but Firmin, unless she had an order to give. Shrike grew desperately jealous. He was all for knocking the lad on the head, stabbing him in the dark, or telling his master a story which assuredly would not have failed for colour. But when he spoke to Blanchmains about this, his answer was a slim white finger on a thin red lip. He gathered that Mistress Blanchmains had her ideas, and he was

quite right. It is a great thing to detect a weakness in those you have to serve. Having found it, you can examine at large. Blanchmains found herself wishing that the Earl might be away for more than his customary two years of warfare.

This was the position of affairs when the young Lady Sabine had been Queen of Speir for three years and a half. The season was then April, and the last snow blotted from the valleys of Pikpoyntz.

CHAPTER III

SORGES ELECTS

EARLY in that April a letter arrived from the Earl of Pikpoyntz, to whom the châtelaine had written that the Lady Sabine was near sixteen years old and ready for her first communion in May. ‘You are to know,’ wrote the Earl through his secretary, ‘that not only do we assent to your devout motions in regard to the little Lady Sabine, but that we are even eager to behold the graceful edifice of her body crowned with our Blessed Redeemer’s sublime gift to mankind, seeing that our design is as fixed as ever it was at first to raise her up nearer to us and our estate, at once high and painful; so that we may associate our cares with hers and hers with our own. Trusting, therefore, fully in your zeal for our temporal and spiritual welfare, we commend the little lady to your evangelical discretion. From Beatenshoe, this 19th day of March.’ This was sealed with the Earl’s privy signet of the Burning River and marked with a sprawling red P., which was the nearest the great man could strain towards his title.

When Blanchmains got sight of this letter she kept her room for two days. Sorges, seraphically disposed, read it not otherwise than as an exhortation to ensure Sabine's heavenly privilege so far as he might. The Earl, whom he had suspected of rape, now intended marriage! By the mercy of Heaven! He gulped what might be horrible in that for the sake of the great glory of it, so obviously his pupil's due. As he put it, the greatest lady, the most royal child he had ever dreamed of, was to be mated to the greatest man he had ever known. He forgot her extreme youth, her beauty, her promise, her likely fate, his own pitiful anticipations, in his approval of the coming honour. It was the least she could exact; but, Mother of God, to be Countess of Pikpoyntz! He determined that she should do him credit; her soul should be a polished mirror and reflect his devotion.

She had been a very apt pupil, not only by disposition, but by intention as well. It seemed as if she realised the obligations of her great hidden estate to excel in whatever she set her mind at. Her Latinity was good, she knew the Psalter, the penitential psalms by heart, certain of the Epistles and Gospels. She could expound the Creed, follow the Ordinal of the Mass, say the Hours, was devoted to Mary and most of the saints. The Legendary also she knew, and she could sing in a low, steady voice such hymns as *Te Lucis*, *Veni Creator*, and *Pange Lingua*. She was punctual with the Rosary, strict in her fasts, and gave largely to the poor. Sorges, reviewing

the position as calmly as he could, judged her ripe for confession. Her communion was to be made on the 7th of May, the feast of Saint Stanislaus, and, it being by now the 25th of April, Father Sorges prepared for what he designed to be the first of a series of particular interviews with his pupil. It was the last as well as the first of them ; for what he learned that day took him to the most desperate deed of his life.

At this signal interview he produced a large clasped book, no less than the Register of the Peculiar of Speir. He set it open on the table before him, laid his hands upon it, moistened his lips, cleared his throat, blinked, and began.

‘ My child,’ he said, ‘ although the dignity and additions of his lordship the Earl put him far above the necessities of a meaner sort of people, it hath always been the laudable custom of his house to submit, so far as may be done, to the laws of Holy Church and the wholesomer laws of the realm.’

Sabine made no sign. Sorges, in all innocence, went on :

‘ So in this register you will find in its proper place among Baptisms the name of Gernulf de Salas (as our Earl then was), with those of his parents, Morcar de Salas, Earl of Pikpoyntz, Bonamour, the Countess of the same, and of his sponsors, Mervyn Corleon, Simon de Landeveer, and Pruina Abbess of Unthank. So also is recorded his first communion. It would be his wish, my child, that you should conform in like manner ; and if I mistake not, it would be your

wish. Tell me, then, your names and degrees that I may inscribe them in the book.'

He dipped his pen. Sabine remained silent for a while. Then she said quietly :

'There is nothing to inscribe as yet, Father. I have not made my communion.'

'My child, I may not communicate those who are not of the Peculiar. The Bull, "*Vulpes vero*," forbids it. To make you of the parish I must record your baptism and the fact of your entry here.'

Sabine was thinking hard ; at any rate she was frowning and tangling her fingers. Sorges' pen was dry before her brows cleared.

Even then she did not speak for some three minutes, but kept her grave eyes fixed upon her director as if unwilling to discharge herself of her secret, or to burden him. Finally, with a little shake of her head, she spoke.

'I can see no reason why you should not know it now, Father. Take your pen and write what I shall tell you.'

Sorges dipped, and beamed expectantly upon her. Now, at last, his prescience was to be proved ! It was.

'Names, my child ?' asked he, pen in hand. The answer came deliberate. 'Sabine de Renny,' said she smoothly. Sorges dropped his pen and his jaw as he fell back.

'Mary of the Angels !' he whispered in a stare. 'Are you a Renny of Coldscaur ?'

Sabine stiffened in her chair. 'No,' said she with a significant correction, 'no, Father, I am Renny of Coldscaur.'

Sorges covered his eyes ; he appeared to be praying. But when he looked up there was no dew of prayer on his eyes or in his husky voice.

‘Is this possible, just Heaven?’

For answer, Sabine, upright, opened the front folds of her long gown, and parted her under garments to the very skin. There round her middle was the golden chain which Blanchmains had seen on her first night at Speir.

But Sorges, knowing it well, stared at it as if it were a portent from the skies. His thin arm stretched out slowly to point at it—the sleeve of his cassock was very short—then he struck his forehead. ‘Investiture !’ he cried, ‘the cincture of the House !’

He looked at the child with something like terror. ‘But who did this ? What king ? When ?’

‘I did it myself,’ said the little Lady Sabine.

‘You are Renny of Coldscaur ! You are of that House ! You are yourself The Chieftain !’

Down upon his two knees he went and shuffled to kiss her hand. ‘And your parents—your parents——?’ he faltered.

‘They are dead.’

‘And your brothers ?’

‘Dead, dead,’ she murmured, struggling with herself ; ‘please write and be done.’ Sorges made a botch of it. His hand shook. But he ended at last.

‘Parents’ names, my lady ?’ No more ‘child’ to this Vase of Election.

‘Blaise V., Mary of Hartlepe.’

‘Ah, Lord of days ! Sponsors ?’

'Richard de Melsa, the King's nephew, the Earl Monthermer, Adhelidis the Queen, Isoult Countess of Hauterive, the Lady Roëse de la Tour de Yon.'

'Light and Darkness,' moaned Sorges, 'I can write no more.'

'Father, 'you are ill,' said Sabine, rising. 'I will call for Clotilda or Blanchmains.'

Sorges put up his hand. 'Call for nobody, madam, but sit still, and wait till I am able to speak. I beseech it of you.' He spoke so authoritatively that, for once in her life, Sabine gave over her intent. It made no difference, as she subsequently resumed it; but for the moment she sat back in her great chair until the poor man got his breath.

Father Sorges wiped the sweat from his forehead with a red handkerchief; he gulped down his dismay twice or thrice before he could speak. When at last he was articulate there was a different note in his voice—a note which announced that he had taken a side.

'Ah, my sweet and gracious lady,' he said, 'I see it all! He has murdered your father, mother, brothers. You are alone.' Sabine said nothing, but she heard him. 'Renny of Coldscaur!' went on the good Sorges, apparently addressing Heaven, 'Renny of Coldscaur, the greatest next the throne, a child, in the house of her father's assassin!' He turned suddenly. 'What of your kinsfolk, lady? What of the Prince-Bishop Valéric? What of Bishop Stephen, my old master? What of your cousins whom these princes have in ward?'

But she stopped him with a lifted hand. ‘Blaise, my father, knew nothing of these persons, Father, nor they of him. He denied them his lands, and would never enter theirs.’

Sorges wailed. ‘I might have known, Lord help me ! Did ever Renny do else to his brother but hate him ? O house of sorrow, house of sorrowful fate ! O proud house brought low ! Lord God, shall this endure ? Madam,’ he said, turning to the silent girl, ‘the pity of this fact overwhelms me. But I will grow stronger by the mercy of the just God. You are alone, but for me. Therefore I will be strong. Let us pray.’

Sabine stared at him, but did not see it at all.

‘Thank you, Father,’ said she, very much Renny ; ‘I have Firmin.’ But at this the priest lost hold of himself.

‘Firmin ! Firmin !’ he shrilled. ‘Firmin, that clot ! Do you put Firmin up against the Earl of Pikpoyntz, madam ? As well put up a rag doll. Oh, madam, Madam de Renny, you are mad, you are mad ! The man will eat you raw, devour your great inheritance ; you will be as a field-flower in the hollow of his hand. He has slain Blaise, now do you think he will stay for you ? No more o’ this, o’ God’s name, or I shall rave.’

He began to wring his hands, dimly conscious that he was adjuring rock. Sabine looked him full in the face. Her unflinching eyes had a cold bright speck apiece.

‘I will never meet the Earl of Pikpoyntz until I can come as Renny against his foe,’ said

she. Whereat Sorges laughed aloud—a laugh of agony.

‘I have been a servant of your father’s brother,’ he said, ‘of Bishop Stephen of Havilot. I know the traditions, the incredible greatness and sorrow of your high house. You will meet the Earl, you say—you, child—and with Firmin. Firmin! Firmin! O Lord of us all, what is this?’

He mocked at her in his distress, more of a fool for his pains than Firmin could ever have been. Sabine grew drier and drier, less of an orphan and more of a queen with every groan of the infatuate old man.

She got up ; she was very cool indeed, without resentment or gratitude, but plainly mistress of her resolve. ‘I think our discussion is concluded,’ she said. ‘We will go on with our preparation another time.’ Then she walked out of the room in her stateliest manner to the arm of Firmin, attendant on the terrace. Sorges saw her begin to talk to that impassive youth—he threw his arms up like a man drowning, shut his eyes and strained his despair through clenched teeth. The terrace window was a lodestone, drew him to watch and judge. He saw the two heads together, the girl’s leaning, eager, confidential ; she was talking very fast, and, he believed, really crying. Firmin kept his ; it was hung, but he looked round once or twice as if uneasy. Then Sorges saw him drop his mistress’s arm and put his own lightly round her waist. She did not seem to notice the liberty ; the torrent of her troubles, voiced at last, perhaps carried off her wits. Sorges, frozen to the window,

could do nothing but stare. His heart hammered at his ribs, well-nigh choked him. Then he heard a light step behind and, turning, saw Blanchmains.

Speir has many windows ; the view of the Valley of Stones over the terraces is very fine.

The priest whipt his hands behind his back to glare at the maid. The maid smiled tenderly in his face ; that poor face was streaked with wet.

‘Dear Father Sorges,’ said she with her hand on her heart, ‘are you going forth on your errand of mercy ?’

‘I am so engaged, mistress.’

‘And can you tell me where to find our lady ? She was with you of late.’

‘She was ; but, as you see, I am alone—or could be.’

‘Ah, she is gone to meditate—your counsels ?’

‘God, woman !’ cried the old priest, ‘she is meditating anything else you choose. Be so good as to let me pass. Stay ! Come with me. I will give you a note for her. I must make a journey—a long journey, my Saviour !’

‘Willingly, my Father.’

Blanchmains, all agog, waited — her eyes sparkling.

Sorges with a fluttering hand botched a couple of slips. He finally achieved, folded, and tied with silk a longish note.

‘There, mistress,’ he said, ‘give that to your lady in one hour from now. It is important. Forget anything you choose, but forget not that. In one hour from now, if you please. There, there, my child’—for Blanchmains, with clasped

hands, was kneeling before him—‘there! May God and Our Blessed Lady be to you all that you deserve. Watch over our Lady Sabine. I must go indeed.’ And gone he was.

Blanchmains sat down in Sabine’s chair, playing with the note in her hand. First she compressed her red lips, then she looked out of the windows, lastly she untied the note and set herself to master it.

‘Pest!’ she said, ‘it is in Latin. Oh, a much too learned lady. Well, well, let us see. “*Dilectissimae et honoratissimae suae Dominae Sabinae,*”’ she read—ah! an address. She wandered on till she came to something which made her frown: ‘*Reverendo in Christo patri Stephano Havilottiensi Episcopo.*’ Now, who might he be? But at the next name she caught her breath, literally panted. ‘*Inclyta domus atque miserrima de Reini,*’ she read, and leapt into full conviction. Renny, Renny of Coldscaur! Now she knew with whom she had to deal. There came a green light into the eyes of the chalk-faced girl at this phase, which may have become her and yet not have been very pleasant. It gave her a blank, sightless appearance—the look of a socketted statue—a tragic mask. Her lips moved, but all the words to be understood were in French. ‘*Renie pas Reini,*’ they were; which uttered, she shook the glaze from her eyes, and resumed her search for landmarks. ‘*Firminium garcionem improbum.*’ Firmin? Well, Firmin would be useful. *Improbum* was improbably a compliment. At the end were four words in a language she knew:

'*Je vous sauveray ancor,*' she read, and was able to smile again at the priest's simplicity. As she scrupulously refolded and retied the billet—'Ah, Father Sorges, Father Sorges,' she said, with a whimsical twist of the head, 'if you are for saving her, I must be for saving myself.'

For some time she sat still, twisting her fingers, pinching her lips, frowning, as she puzzled. She guessed Stephen of Havilot to be a kinsman of Sabine's—Lord or Earl of that place which lay, she knew, far in the West, in Campflors. If Sorges were going thither, as (knowing his Western origin) she guessed he might be, it would take him three weeks or a month. She knew his horse and guessed at the roads. Three weeks to go, three to return—six weeks. Time enough to turn round in—good. Now, what else? Sabine was a Renny—eh? That must mean Renny of Coldscaur, for Pikpoyntz was a towering falcon who flew high for his quarry. Were there any other Rennys? At this moment her eyes caught upon the book lying open on the table. She jumped at it. Father Sorges had been in such a hurry to fetch at his Stephen of Havilot that he had left the Speir Register. There then, at last, she had the whole story to her hand. Donna Sabine de Renny of Coldscaur—of course! Stephen, Bishop of Havilot—of course! Yes, and there was Valéric, Prince-Bishop of Grand Fé—also a Renny. Blanchmains grew cheerful, in a chilly sort of way, for she saw the whole thing. Sorges was going to rouse the Rennys—on Firmin's account, it appeared! Well, she was going to rouse Firmin—on her own account. It remained to be

seen whose account would get *quietus* first. Blanch-mains was clear that Sabine must not be Countess of Pikpoyntz if she could help it. She did not know, of course, that Sorges was now equally clear on that point. She thought he was only afraid of Firmin ; she began to see her way. Should she deliver the note ? If it discredited Firmin, it would do no harm. Nothing would so effectually egg on Sabine, the little mule. But she was not certain ; it would be safer to deliver it to the fire. This was done, and then she went out to watch the young couple on the terrace.

Father Sorges was in such a hurry to reach his lodging that he fluttered down his six hundred steps three at a time. His first act when he landed at his door was to thank God very heartily that he had not arrived in pieces ; his next to eat a hunch of bread ; his third to forage in his cupboard for a parchment roll. This turned out to be a rough map, made by himself, of the stages of his journey, made forty years before, from Havilot to Speir. He now turned his map upside down. ‘What I have to do,’ said he, munching his crust, ‘is to avoid the Earl’s garrison at Cantacute. I must go west to Farlingbridge. Being then in Logres I shall be safe. Then I drop down the two rivers to Minster-Merrow ; afterwards from city to city—Cragarn, Bréault, Saint-Save, Blemish—until I strike on Joyeux Saber. It may take me any time between three weeks and five ; but God will be with me, and I shall certainly get there.’ He was not long over his equipment : his breviary, his cloak, a comb completed it.

Arms he would have scorned had he had any within reach. He did wear, however, his crucifix outside his cloak. Then he saddled his flea-bitten old roan, pulled the girths as tight as he dared, and shambled off along the western road. The mountains closed in on all hands ; the roaring Sâr drowned the plod of his horse's hoofs. Blanch-mains had been right in one thing—he was going to rouse the Rennys, but not against Firmin.

CHAPTER IV

INCLYTA DOMUS ATQUE MISERRIMA

WHEN Renny came before his lord to receive investiture from kingly hands of a kingly fee and franchise, he stood with his own hands held out, fettered with a golden chain. The Constable handed to the King the Sword of Estate ; the King severed the chain ; Renny was free. The fetter then served for cincture ; with his own chain the King girt Renny round the loins ; the trumpets shrilled in the market-place at Renny-Helm ; under the great tower the Heralds craved acceptance ‘*du très hault, très puissant, redouté Prince, Monseigneur Blaise par la grâce de Dieu, Reini de Coldscaur, Sieur de Marvilion, Cousin de la très-sainte Vierge Marie, Cousin du Roy,*’ etc. etc. Thereby this princely person stood seised of Coldscaur, and all Marvilion knew him for an Earl, though he chose to have no title but Renny of Coldscaur. Such was the custom instituted by Eudo the Wolf, seapirate, descended from Romans (from a dim Cneius Pompilius Arrhenis, as they boasted), when he came to the kingdom of Jadis ; and still it held at every violent death of a Renny.

Inclyta domus atque miserrima, wrote Sorges to his pupil, the latest Renny ; and truly enough wrote he. If the records of a famous realm, the annals, chronicles, romances, *faits et gestes*, Rolls of Parliament, Files of Chancery, and all the rest of such gear can report me a noble house more rooted in pride, more furiously insisting upon proud observance, more blotted with blood, more wicked or more miserable, I have searched their folios in vain. There are traditions about most of the great old families of Jadis ; their names are proverbial, or symbolical, if you please. Thus De Bréauté must always break women's hearts, De Flahault hand down inordinate desire from father to son, Botetort after Botetort be shifty, Melsa profuse with what Melsa spared him ; but Renny, it was said, warred upon his own kind, drained his own blood, heaped sin upon sin for himself, killed without mercy, was killed without ruth—thieved, lied, debauched, blasphemed,—but never abated one jot of his claim to be royal ; and whether he paltered with God, his king, his honour, or his salvation, never swerved from the Renny Creed, which was : *What I need I claim, what I claim I have, what I have I hold.* ‘*Renie pas Reini*’ ran the legend of the house cut deep upon the escutcheon over the portal at Coldscaur ; ‘*Renie pas Reini*,’ said every man of them to his brother in turn, and enforced it or paid for it with the sword.

Inclyta domus atque miserrima Arrhenensis, indeed. There could be none more famous in the realm of Jadis and none more wretched. A race of heroes, incalculably ancient, very near the

throne, handsome as some full-hued rank of gods—and hag-ridden by a desperate black fate. So it was with them. From that far day when Eudo Reini the Wolf, having harried Marvilion for twenty miles square and built his crag-castle upon the embers, brought into it his fierce Byzantine wife Basilida Kyriozōë, with her dyed purple plaits of hair, her white face and her green eyes—from that day a doom malignant and perverse sat down by the marriage-bed. Not a Renny died in it, though each in turn killed and was killed to call it his. Not a Renny, save Eudo himself, so much as died fighting a fair field. Renny after Renny stood in his hall, flushed and splendid, and rooted his enormous claim like a flag at his right hand. He claimed to be at once master of men and slave of his own appetite. For that he always paid dear; yet the man who killed him to abate it set it up anew. I shall not attempt to follow them out in detail; they were many and of divers degrees in arrogant rascality. Let their names suffice. Eudo the Wolf had the grace to be killed in some sort of battle. True, he was shot before the engagement began, shot in the eye by a shaft from ambush, and tumbled into a ditch to be out of the way. Basilida, who had loved him in a wild-beast fashion, came creeping out in the dusk to find him. It is said that the sound of her wailing could be heard for two miles over Dunfleet marshes. She found him lying defaced and dishonoured in his ditch, his sword untarnished by any blood. This served her turn well enough.

They left five children behind them to fend for themselves ; and fend they did—with steel. The first Blaise followed Eudo, Blaise Red-foot as he was called. His sons killed him and succeeded to his inheritance, each in turn treading on his brother's body : Stephen, Halcro, then Blaise II. Blaise II., having no brothers left and his children too young for his attentions, picked a quarrel with the fighting Bishop of Cragarn, a kinsman by marriage. He caught the churchman and built a blind tower of masonry to hold him fast. To this day it is called the Mitre Tower. The Bishop, indeed, died in it, but he did manage to grapple with his enemy who had come in to revile him. The pair of them fell down the ladder-way together, and broke between them a brace of worthless necks. Blaise III., Harmin, Dunstan, then three Halcros in succession—Halcro Wryneck, Halcro Stiffneck, Halcro Cutneck ; the Wydos and the rest of them must be passed over. What was reported of the horses of King Duncan of Scotland would fit their case. Out of one Rolf and his high-minded, unhappy wife, Isotta de Chyprès, came a fourth Blaise before Rolf was drowned in his castle ditch one dark December night. He was vilely drunk, it seems ; yet he got nearer to a bed at home than any of his house before or since. Blaise IV. married his niece Sibyl Baskerville, with talk of a dispensation from Rome ; but none ever saw the document. This Blaise was huge and middle-aged, the bride a baby ; and Blaise was an ill-conditioned giant. He fell foul of the Countess Isabel de Forz, and

had his tongue cut out by an adventurous knight, one Salomon de Born. Blaise Sanslang is his name for all time.

Out of his progeny this history comes ; for he had many sons.

These were their names : Blaise, who reigned at Coldscaur as Blaise V. ; then Otho, who had a daughter Mabilla by his wife, the heiress of Joyeux Saber in Campflors, and no other issue ; then Roger, who was killed with all his sons, fighting against his brother the Chieftain. He too left a daughter at home, Holdis, or Hold, to wit. Of these ladies anon ; but there were two other brothers, churchmen both, and one of them, the elder, was Valéric, Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fé ; and the other was Bishop Stephen of Havilot, whom Sorges had served.

It was when Blaise V., son of Sanslang, had reigned some dozen years at Coldscaur with a wife alive, five sons and a daughter, that the Earl of Pikpoyntz suddenly crossed his borders one misty autumn night, surprised the Scaur, reddened all the sky from edge to edge with the flames he set a-going, secured some thousand heads of black cattle, and paid off old scores by cutting down Blaise, his five sons and his wife in their own hall. This particular Blaise, by comparison mild-mannered, was indubitably a scoundrel ; but he met his death—he and his boys—as became a Renny. It was the hour of ease and minstrelsy in hall. He was weaponless and in silk, his wife was by his side on the dais ; the child, grave-eyed Sabine, was on his knee. Below sat the retainers

and household, all unarmed, in the midst a young minstrel was singing a song of the South, which praised in the fluent southern fashion the great house, ‘miraculous flowers of beauty, of honour, and of knightly deeds.’ In the hush which followed the sudden burst of clamour outside, the great doors were flung open, and Pikpoyntz, in full armour, but bare-headed as he always was in his fighting, strode in at the head of his guards. ‘Renny, you poisonous thief,’ he roared, in the tones which had earned him his nickname, Bull of the North, ‘I have come to send you to hell !’ Blaise with one sweep of his eye saw what his chances were. He never moved, but ‘Sit down, all of you,’ he said to his household, and was obeyed. His wife’s hand trembled on his arm, the young men his sons insensibly took hands, but not a soul moved.

‘To your work, Pikpoyntz,’ said Blaise de Renny then ; and Pikpoyntz did it. There is no reason to think that a soul was left alive in that hall but one. That was the child Sabine, whom you know by this time—a prize he meant to turn to better account than his herd of trampling cattle.

For the fact was, that Blaise and his five sons were the last males of the long line of Eudo, unless you are to count the two churchmen his brothers, which for obvious reasons is forbidden. Valéric, Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fé in Logres, was one of these—a great man whose intellect at least scandal could never tarnish. The other was Stephen de Renny, Bishop of Havilot in Campflors—Sorges’ friend of the West. So far, therefore, Pikpoyntz

had swooped to a purpose—if his purpose had been only to scour the Scaur.

But he had swooped to still better purpose. After the males came the women ; for Coldscaur is a female fief. Donna Sabine became Renny of Coldscaur ; was heiress of all Marvilion, and very marriageable ; in her right he could possess himself of her royalty by a clean title instead of a bloody one ; and if this was not in his mind when he compassed his deed of shame, he is not the man whom History reports. After her, it is true, came two other women—Mabilla, daughter of Otho, and Hold, Roger's daughter. Of these he may or may not have heard, as also that they were older than the heiress and more instantly to be wedded. But if he knew of their names he must have known also of their conditions, that Mabilla de Renny was said to be betrothed to the King's brother, and that Donna Hold was in the ward of the Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fé. Wisely, I think, he chose for the bird in the hand ; hawk-like he swooped where the brood lay thickest. The little Donna Sabine was the youngest of the cousins ; but as well as the Renny name she had the Renny inheritance. And that was a whole shire, and marched with Pikpoyntz.

I beg the reader's pardon for this long-winded digression, but there was no help for it. You are to deal in this book with the fortune of the three cousins—these last of the Rennys : you must know whence they sprang in order that you may judge of the length of their jumping. It seems an unlikely bed in which to look for the virtuous

bearing which is a chief grace in ladies. Yet between them they worked out the curse : Renny had his own marriage-bed to lie in and to die in at last.

And now for Campfors, Father Sorges, and Mabilla de Renny.

CHAPTER V

THE PROUD LADY

IMAGINE Sorges, blear-eyed and anxious, alternately fortified and dismayed by his mission, prodding his roan through country ways, munching his crusts, reading his breviary, dispensing blessings, jerks of the rein and inquiries of the road on all hands—imagine Sorges in a laughing May landscape, and forestall him for a little. You shall see more than he ever saw.

In the vine-bright hill-province of Campflors—country of Oh! and Ah! in many intonations, where poets do the work of lovers and fighting men, and Dame Venus and her son get a side-wind of the honour due to Dame Mary and hers—in Campflors, I say, and in the castle of Joyeux Saber, there lived the scornful young beauty known to her world as The Proud Lady, and to her sponsors as Mabilla de Renny. The castle was her half-brother's, the Viscount Bernart's; not far off was the hold of her guardian, Bishop Stephen—the walled city of Havilot; fronting all, across a glossy descent of myrtles, lemon-trees, and ilex, lay the sea, deep-blue as the iris of Mabilla's eyes.

Over all the province love was vocal, ran sighing through the trees, upon the sea lay laughing softly, in the shady corners of streets, under carved balconies, in thickets of flowering thorn, by starry night or at hush of noon came open-vowelled from the throats of patient men who plucked at lute-strings as if they were hearts.

The young lady was attuned to this mild music, but only half attuned, since half of her was Renny. The Renny fire, the Renny fury of the blood was chilled on the surface by the phlegm of De Save (her mother's name), to make of her a chord of provocative, strangely stirring music. Outwardly frank to the point of daring, masking thus a reserve more deliberate than a black frost ; in face and form at once sumptuous and fine, at once delicate and hardy, showing at once the tender oval and frail lips of the Madonna, the dauntless eyes and thrust bosom of the Niké of the Greeks ; a blend of judgment and innocence, a woman with the motions of a child, a child with a woman's discretion, fire, and snow, a heart whose antechamber set open invites you to a sealed door, a golden cage to hold ice—such was the young Lady Mabilla.

She was not very tall, and her colouring was pale, sometimes even pallid ; she was never more than delicately flushed. Her very lips were pale carnation, and always dry. Her hair, very long and lustrous, was of sable brown, and up to her sixteenth year she wore it loose. She had dark-blue eyes (which changed with her moods), black lashes to them ; a neck like a shaft, a shape audacious in so young a girl ; an upper lip too short for kind-

ness, and a chin too full for humility. Behind this lovely mask lay her merciless gift of raillery, a tongue like a whetted sword, an understanding which could pierce any sophistry and excused no appeal from judgment on the merits. All this, with other qualities of hers equally rare in ladies—a certain flintiness of mind, a lack of the religious sense (though she punctually performed every due of Holy Church), and a great deal of irresponsiveness where love and the tender passions were in debate—got her the name of The Proud Lady.

In matters of love she was believed impregnable. She was accounted a barbed virgin, a girl of whips and steel, and, though none could deny the charms of her person, suspected of amazonry in will if not in fact. No man at a feast had kissed nearer than her cheek ; she was said to dance happiest when her partner was a girl ; at jousts, tournaments, or Courts of Love no youth's arm had ever dared her waist. On their knees poets and knights, vavasours, viscounts, seneschals, even Earls of counties and (since the truth must be told) a Prince of the Blood Royal had spoken love to her—Ebles de Saint-Horn, Geoffroi Mauteste, De Bréault, De Cragarnis, De la Roche-tordue. She heard all their words. The habit of the country was to put such matters beyond all doubt ; if a young man loved a young woman, he never scrupled to tell her. Then, if she would accept of him, she took his face between her hands and, stooping where he knelt, kissed his mouth. That was how the Lady Maent of Montaignac, for instance, took Gaucelin de Bry. But Donna Mabilla

had never done more than lend her cheek, and her general way of accepting devotion had been to stretch out her hand for the homage-kiss. Sometimes she would dub a knight, giving the accolade with the flat of the sword. But mostly she roamed fancy-free with virgins of her own age and sex, and was least likely to afford a man her friendship when he showed he needed it badly. The real way to her intimacy was not that of devotion. If you could tell her of her ancestors the Rennys, she always listened ; if you went on to boast of your own, she listened until she judged either that you lied or in your own person belied them. If you ignored her, as likely as not she would be your very good friend. The quick of her nature was pride—first of brain, next of birth. You had needs beware how you touched her. Treat her as an equal on either score, she accepted you ; treat her as a sovereign, she was a tyrant ; play the man before her, pretend her a luxury or a solace, she would be the bleak Goddess of the bow, and smile as she slew one after another your treasured pretensions to respect.

Stephen of Havilot, the beetle-browed Bishop, when he was not coursing, or fighting, or hunting Jews, lived at Joyeulx Saber and indulged his niece. Renny through and through, he had therefore quarrelled with the head of his house, his brother Blaise of Coldscaur, and only refrained from the same treatment of his brother of Grand-Fé because he despised him. He thought him an old fool. Mabilla's mother had died of her birth ; she was

cut off her kinsfolk by leagues of dangerous country and the Renny rancour against Renny, had never seen her cousin Sabine, never her cousin Hold, had had about her no women her betters and very few her equals. The consequence was that she enjoyed a liberty denied to the ladies of Campflors, went her ardent ways freely, and had lovers before she was so much as in sight of marriage. Betrothed at six years old she had been, to the King's brother, John of Barsaunter—a man, by now, of forty to her seventeen ; but politics had been stormy, the Prince much intrigued ; he had had no time and she no care to think of marriage. Indeed, she had seldom seen the man.

Therefore she went free, and to her fell those amorous adventures which Campflors holds are properly for married women. It was only her virginal frost kept her from staling before her beauty had flowered. She was wooed, hymned, lauded, pestered ; she was cried a Goddess before she was out of bed, and went to sleep to the sound of wailing *serenas*. She had no quarter, but asked never for what she never gave. Mostly she laughed at these affairs, sometimes she was bitter, sometimes she stormed ; whichever she did the suitor writhed.

For three months before Sorges started on his errand of ‘Haro !’ unconscious of any mischief and meditating none, she had been engaged holding at arm’s length the latest and most explicit of her adorers—a minstrel, very young, very conceited, and very poor, by name Lanceilhot. This youth, all his goods in his head (with a few neatly written in his wallet), had sung his way to her gates and

fought the entry by his audacity. Viscount Bernart would have whipped, the Bishop hanged, him ; but Donna Mabilla, as they called her, gave him her little hand to kiss. Lanceilhot had burst out crying over it. Mabilla thought him a baby, but bade him stay by her. He had stayed without any pretence that he was not there as her inexorable lover. Mabilla had raised, then knit, her fine brows, had bitten her lips and torn several feathers to pieces. The little poet amused her ; the rest was his affair : let him stay. She was now—Sorges shuffling down the mountain road within sight of his mark—with him in the lemon-tree walk. The hour was eight of the morning, the month singing June, the place a marble terrace, the scene a scented slope of myrtle woods to the sea. Up from the hidden shore, lipped by little tired waves, came the tinkle of a chapel bell ; across the bay rose the grey hills patched with green strips of vine ; crowning all was a white convent, *Nostre Dame d'Amor*.

The lady was in russet velvet and lace ; on her soft hair was a crown of stars. She leaned her face in her hands ; she had an orange flower between her teeth. She watched the sea, not the minstrel ; but the minstrel watched her.

Lanceilhot Paulet's outward habit may be dismissed in a word. He was shy, he was pale, he was slim and of no height in particular, he was fond of finery. He was, unfortunately for his promise of manhood, rather a pretty boy. His dark cropped head was very well shaped, round and properly set on ; he had the poetic brow, the

sullen poetic grey eyes under dark eyebrows, small straight nose, firm little chin, pretty pathetic mouth. He affected a style of dress which must needs be tawdry because it aimed at splendour and hit frippery. This amused Mabilla. If she had cared for him it would have hurt her. He was now, if you please, in a dark-blue velvet tunic edged with grey fox ; he had a belt of silver gilt filigree, wherefrom a dagger—never used. He had light-blue hose on his pair of legs, little long-toed buff shoes. By a ribbon round his shoulder hung a lute which rested on his back ; and further, to match the hanger, there was a wallet which you may swear was more often in use. It contained manuscript mainly devoted to his lady's charms. Add that he was perfectly honest, sincerely lyrical, quick to feel, with a turn for dramatic effects, confident that he could do anything, reluctant to admit that he had as yet done nothing, contended for in turn by pride and sensibility—there you have Lanceilhot Paulet at nineteen. Those were not the makings of a happy man, though they serve well enough for the confection of poets.

He was expounding to her idle ears the music of Horace, a poet of whom, if he knew little, she luckily knew less. Prosody in Lanceilhot's day was not an exact science ; but he had caught at a rhythm of his own which fitted trippingly the words, and

Vitas hinnuleo me similis, Chloë,

sang he to his lute, and looked at his listener as if she were Chloë and he believed it.

Here he broke off to admire the sentiment, though he had done wiselier to keep to the lilt.

‘Ah, fortunate poet !’ he cried to the air, ‘with thy lady like a fawn—oh, lovely image ! So should ladies always fly and lovers pursue ; for the treasure is prized for its rarity.’

Mabilla turned upon him a limpid gaze.

‘If the lady were never caught, Lanceilhot, there would be no treasure at all.’

‘Your pardon, lady, she would be caught soon enough.’

‘Because the poet has the longer legs ?’

‘Because he has the stouter heart. Moreover, he hath the image of her already seated there.’

‘Let that content him, then,’ said she, ‘since he made it himself—as indeed he made his flying lady. Ladies, I think, do not fly so often as they should. What is this divine poet of yours, after all, but another hunter of game, who starts it, not that he may eat, but that he may capture ? Your Horace’s Chloë was not the fawn, I think. Rather, it was he who did the fawning. He does not please me—sing of something wiser than love.’

Lanceilhot thought this blasphemy and looked his thought.

‘There is no wiser thing than love, my lady,’ said he, ‘since love it was that wrought the world and urged it to move. And every moving creature after his kind it urgeth. And so saith Rabanus, the wise Arabian, and so in his degree said David, the prince of poets and of Israel.’

‘Most assuredly it urged King David,’ said Mabilla, with her flower between her teeth ; ‘but

his is not an example you would recommend to yourself, Lanceilhot.'

'Eh, I know not, I know not at all!' sighed the boy with a sudden weariness; 'but like him I am wretched enough and can cry,

My God, my God, look upon me!'

She was not unkind; she knew his trouble. She had known it for three months. Therefore she looked out over the valley—whereas, to any one less abject than he, she would have fired her scorn directly at the scorned. Lanceilhot covered his face in his arm, and so remained until she spoke again.

'Master Paulet,' said the lady in the end, 'because you are a poet, must you cease to be a man?'

She said it smoothly, but it stung him to lift his head. She neither moved nor noticed him. He coloured, bit his lip, flushed a little. What was on the tip of his tongue did not, however, leave that sanctuary.

'Lady,' he said as gently as he could, 'I cannot cease to be what I am not, nor is it my fault that I am a poet. I shall be a man also in time, if God suffer it.'

'Meantime I am to suffer because you are not a man?'

'You play with words, my princess, as with other things.'

'I play with what toys I find. But I am in a bad humour this morning, Lanceilhot. Do not tempt me too far.'

He grew humbler, though his eagerness also

revived. Once get the talk to ‘thou’ and ‘I’ and what lover is tardy?

‘Forgive me, my lady, for tempting you at all. I forget myself, my place and yours, it seems.’

‘It seems so to me,’ said Mabilla.

‘I will take care to remember it henceforth, madam,’ he replied with a bow, ‘if only to spare you the trouble of wounding me.’

She arched her brows. ‘Do I wound you when I offer you a chair?’

‘Yes, madam, when the chair is set in the dust. My only offence is that I love you.’

Mabilla raised a finger to her lips. ‘You must not say that.’

‘I can say nothing else, my lady, so long as I am here.’

‘Then I can only remind you of—I can only offer you a chair, Lanceilhot. Oh, foolish boy,’ she suddenly cried, turning to him, holding out her hands, ‘let us be happy. We have been happy over our Latin and poetry and lutes. Let us be happy still. Do we not deserve it? We are very young.’

She looked so beautiful to him, so ardent in her appealing youth, that he knew misery was more delight than such happiness.

‘Ah, God!’ he cried out pettishly, ‘you know that I cannot.’ Mabilla shrugged and turned away. ‘*Renie pas Reini*,’ said she. This stung him afresh.

‘Renny! Renny! Ah, Madam Virgin, teach me at least to forget that she is Renny.’

‘You are never likely to forget that I am

Renny,' said Mabilla. 'Ah!' and she gave a sigh of relief, 'here comes my Bernart.' Lanceilhot shivered to see the smile she had for her half-brother.

The Viscount Bernart de Save, olive-dark, grey-eyed, and slim, six feet of sinewy grace, came down the terrace, his page behind him carrying sword and helm. Beside him Mabilla showed all Renny—never a tall race. He kissed her cheeks and threw a nod to the glum little minstrel, friendly but no more. Lanceilhot turned away, cold at the heart, his spell of enchantment over. Mabilla forgot, or appeared to forget, him; she took her brother's arm and they walked away together. The pages loitered to make fun of the poet, whose hapless case was of the common stock. Lanceilhot, leaning on the balustrade, heard the clear high voice of his mistress; the Viscount threw his head back to guffaw at some sally of hers. Lanceilhot shuddered from sole to crown; she was mocking him—O Heaven! As a matter of fact, she had forgotten his existence; but he would not have shuddered the less to have known that.

'Sing, poet,' said one of the saucy boys, 'sing of your lady. She is out of earshot.'

'*Thou* art not out of earshot, by my soul!' cried Lanceilhot, white-faced and furious. He was too quick for the imp.

'Eh, Mother Virgin, I am not,' he howled, rubbing his tweaked ear. 'Come, Vernon, my comrade, let us leave him to nurse his heart.'

His tormentors left him, and Lanceilhot,

divinely wretched, felt the pricking of poesy. His tablets were out, a very fine *descortz* sprawling over the page—‘*Ay mi ! Domna, coratge !*’—when he heard the voice of Bishop Stephen thundering on the upper terrace. Now, Lanceilhot feared only two things in the world—ridicule and the Bishop of Havilot. He packed up his tablets and sought cover instead of rhymes.

CHAPTER VI

DONNA MABILLA BEDAUBS HERSELF

VERY much happened that morning. Father Sorges came and set the Bishop of Havilot roaring like a stricken bull, Lanceilhot Paulet was given his congee, and Donna Mabilla put her foot in the mire. All things in order. Thus they fell.

That anybody but a Renny should slay a Renny infuriated the Bishop. Sorges' mild eyes paled to the colour of a winter sky to see, blanched more yet to hear him. For the first hour he was for instant battle, and inclined to begin with the Viscount because he did not agree with him. The Viscount was as ready for battle as a young man should be ; but he was not a Renny and he had heard tell of the Earl of Pikpoyntz. 'He keeps an array of 5000 men under arms, my lord, and long ere this the whole Renny fee is in his hands, with as many more to hold it.'

'Bloody villain ! What is this to me ?' the Bishop spluttered. 'The dog is nothing but a border thief.'

'He has thieved this time on the grand scale,

my lord,' said Messire Bernart coolly. To which the Bishop could only lift his arms and groan, 'Bloody villain !'

Donna Mabilla, who heard everything, as her right was, was all for temperate measures. She thought of the cousin Sabine, the girl near her own age, now head of the great house. She pictured her in white, sitting scared in a field of blood ; she saw her under the fangs of the Red Earl, a captive in a shambles, or bound to some unspeakable servitude worse still. She set her face resolutely towards this horrible scene—she never blinked facts : 'I must go to my cousin, my lord,' said she to the Bishop, and waited for the storm.

'Go to the nursery, silly child, and leave your cousin to the men of the House,' the prelate snapped at her.

'Rather, let us take the nursery to Speir, my lord,' said Mabilla. 'It is doubtful if they have anything so innocent there.'

There was enough rebuke in this to prick the angry man. 'I will think of it, I will think of it. Run away now, child, and leave me with your brother, and this worthy man.' Mabilla retired to give her women orders for the journey.

The Bishop, the Viscount, and the worthy man battled it out all the forenoon. Sorges magnified Pikpoyntz, the Bishop added his grievance to his dignity and magnified himself. The Viscount hinted that the greatest grief in the world was not worth a squadron. 'Let Joyeux Saber furnish what it can,' said he ; 'then go north to Logres

and join the array of your lordship's brother, the Prince-Bishop. Being there, you will be upon Pikpoyntz's border, ready to act if action will serve you. But, remember the head of the House of Renny is now a hostage in your enemy's hands. If anything should happen to her, the main line is out.'

'And the next line is in, by my soul!' roared the Bishop. 'My Mabilla becomes Renny of Coldscaur.'

'She should therefore go up with us, my lord,' said her half-brother.

'Go up? Why, Heaven help you, Bernart, what else should she do?' the Bishop cried, forgetful of his nursery counsel.

At dinner, it was announced that as soon as the array could be furnished Bishop Stephen would ride for the North. 'My brother Grand-Fé,' he said to his niece, 'is one of those silvery fools who think the tongue to be humble servant of the head. He will be for practising upon that red robber at Speir. You will see. Of course, any dunce could tell him that precisely the opposite is the true case. What the tongue babbles the wretched headpiece has to defend. Well! you shall see him wriggle and writhe. My own plan is to hit from the shoulder at the first smell of offence: then let the other counter if he can.'

'In this case, however, it appears that he could counter to some purpose,' said the young lady. The Bishop spluttered but agreed.

Preparations were to be pushed on apace. At the rising from dinner it was agreed that they

should start in a week. My Lord Bernart called his esquire to arm him and rode out to see to the summons *equis et armis*. The Bishop retired to bully Sorges and his secretary. The young lady Mabilla got into mischief, according to the fortune of ladies whose brains are shackled by their petticoats. What else was she to do? Idle in the midst of stirring business, she sent for Lanceilhot Paulet.

What was life to her to him was death. The weight of the news seemed to clog his very veins. Here was the end of his three months' dream ; here tumbled the pretty castle he had been building for himself and his lady ! She escaped like a bird that wings to the sun, and left him bathed in the dust of ruin. And now she sent for him to amuse her, to tumble and grin that she might laugh ! The poor wretch was flying a craven flag, looked as sick as a monk at sea. It is to be feared that circumstance is a dirty feeder ; she seldom makes a clean bite, but falls munching upon you, tooth and claw in half a dozen places. Lanceilhot was still reeling under the news when his summons came. He was to posture before the lady whom he had the impertinence to adore, who knew it, and was now to see him mouthing for bread and butter. He had never seen himself lower nor her so immeasurably high.

In he came, lute at back, to her shaded chamber. The girl they called Col-de-Velours took his hand at the door and led him in. In the cool depths he discerned her lying back among her women, fidgeting and mischievous. She was

in her own colours of green and white, her bodice cut low, her hair twisted up with pearls. She was pulling a feather to pieces and looked cross. About her sat her maidens, all handsome and all meek, evidently at their wits' end.

Lanceilhot, at the door, dropt upon his knee.

'Mistress of my soul's house,' he said, 'I have come to do my homage.'

'The compliment is as high as you can lift it, Master Paulet,' said Mabilla, busy with her feather. Paulet knelt on ; she never looked at him. Then, with one of her startling revolts, she threw her idleness off her with her feather, leaned forward, clasped her knee, and looked a smiling invitation to him.

'Oh, Lanceilhot,' says she, 'I am cross because I am a woman. Sing to me, so that I may forget it for a little.' Alas, that was the one thing of which Lanceilhot must always remind her !

He took his lute, and with the first chords became the professional minstrel. Hey, alavi, alavia ! He would sing *The Proud Lady*. She was the Peregrine of the Rock, heya ! The sails of her communed with the upper air, she alone of the birds never stooped, never faltered, nor was foiled ; she alone would not be manned. She would be a haggard, heya ! Quest where she chose and mew not at all. And would you know why ? 'Twas because the blue of Heaven matched her matchless eyes. No other mate could be hers. To love a man she must mirror herself in his eyes. Heu ! was her azure to be clouded in a muddy pond ? Never, by his soul ; let her soar alone, a

falcon greater than she of Puy Ste. Marie, priceless, above all, to be striven for, never attained. Hey, alavi, alavia ! Another chord, and he looked round blushing at the ring.

Mabilla did not like the song, and said so. ‘ You sing of fantasies, Lanceilhot. It is impossible there should be such a lady as that. Think of it, my friend. I beg of you to sing of real people. Sing—ah!—sing me the Song of Renny.’

The Song of Renny was the great epic of the Sorrowful House which Lanceilhot was to write for her, some day.

‘ The Song of Renny is not yet finished, my lady,’ said the minstrel, very solemn.

‘ No, indeed,’ said his mistress, kindling with her thought ; ‘ no, indeed ! It is but just begun. Come, Lanceilhot, I must tell you my news. Go, all of you, and leave us alone.’ This was to the maids.

So flickered the candle of the lad’s life—now blown thin and blue by cold breath, now flaring bright and bold when his lady was too kind. Alone with her in the shady chamber, sitting very near her, with the fragrance of her breath, the touch of her robe, the chance alighting of her hand upon his sleeve—with all the unconscious witchery of her beauty upon him—what wonder if he dreamed of building over high ! She told him all the story, all her resolve, laid open all her ambitions, plied him for counsel, never took it, lifted him close to her soul’s throne and kept him trembling there. ‘ There are three of us left,

Lanceilhot, three girls left to bear up the House of Renny. The Girdle, the Robe, and the Crown : we are the choosers, Lanceilhot. Think of it ! Sabine has the Crown, of course. She is the main line. She is Renny of Coldscaur—greatest in the realm next to the King, the only lord of a Province with no patent of nobility but his own. Oh, Lanceilhot ! ' She caught at his arm, and quick-breathing turned upon him the wonder of her face. ' And which for me, Lanceilhot ? ' she went on, ' which for me who come next ? '

' The Girdle, Lady of my soul, the Girdle,' he muttered.

' The Robe, since I may not have the Crown,' said she. ' I would die for Renny at this hour, if Renny asked it. Let cousin Hold have the Girdle if she will. A toy for a girl ! '

Lanceilhot drank deep of her that day, as well he might : it was his last. So she told him.

' The Song of Renny, Lanceilhot ! ' she clamoured.

' It is now begun, lady,' said he.

' I go to live it out, and you to dream it. You shall come to me again when it is done.'

' Do you send me away, madam ? '

' Nay,' said she, ' but I go my way, and you yours.'

Then he forgot himself and fell at her feet. Then he took her by the knees and implored. She was his life, his joy, his constant wonder and delight. She was necessary to him : he breathed her breath ; she was his sun, his moon, his earth, hell and heaven. Make him her lackey,

but let him be near ; let him scour dishes, he would know she would touch them, and where her fingers had touched, there his lips might be. He was lost utterly out of her sight—ah, let him be near her lest he died ! She laughed, but uneasily ; he prayed the more ; she blushed, he clasped the closer ; she grew angry, he fell crying at her feet. Then she rose up in a rage.

‘I am ashamed, you make me ashamed ; leave my room.’

White and craven, unutterably wretched, he looked up at her, ‘Ah, lady, forgive me, forgive me !’

‘You have no right to ask, and less to expect it of me,’ said she, panting a little. ‘It is presumption, it is folly ; it makes me uncomfortable. I am very angry. More than that, I am disappointed. I had thought you a man. You are two years older than I ; you are nineteen, you tell me, and yet you cannot control yourself better than to behave after this sort to me.’

She spoke quickly and low, but her tone sufficed to overwhelm him. He began to sob. She was too angry to pity him. She stamped her little foot.

‘Get up at once,’ she cried, ‘or I will never speak to you again. You fill me with shame for you.’ That brought him up.

‘You are right, madam,’ he said. ‘I should never have spoken with you at all. You and I are of different worlds. I will go.’

This least touch of manliness saved him. Never expect a woman to reach love by the road of

pity. He knelt down again, kissed the hem of her gown, got quickly up and went towards the door. Womanlike, she let him reach it before she spoke the inevitable.

‘Stop,’ said she.

He turned at that, but stood to his door.

‘I would not part bad friends with you, Master Paulet,’ she said, gently enough. ‘You have been very amiable, and have taught me many things. I shall remember those, and (I hope) forget some others not so profitable for me to have learned.’

Lanceilhot came back and stood before her. They were just of a height, but morally they had not changed places. She looked down, he looked at her. He was very much in earnest, and rather out of breath.

‘Let there be no false pretences, madam,’ he now said. ‘I value your good opinion more than anything in the world, but I should not deserve it if I were not honest. I love you, as you very well know. I ask nothing of you; what you can spare me that you shall give. But so much you must know before you give me anything at all.’

‘Ah! you have no right to speak so to me,’ said Mabilla now.

‘I speak of it as a fact, madam,’ he went on imperturbably. ‘Let us see how we stand. There is no need to recur to it for the present. Your destinies call you one way—mine another. Yours will lead you——’

‘They will lead me to Coldscaur!’ cried she.

Lanceilhot shrugged. ‘The path of such great

ness is a path of blood often enough, and a path of mud, pardieu !'

She was angered ; the play of her bosom began to quicken. 'Do you think that would stay me, Lanceilhot ? Mud, do you say ? Come with me.'

Her head was very high, a thin clear fire burnt evenly over her cheeks ; she took his hand and led him swiftly out of the room, down the corridor, down a winding stair, out by the privy door which leads through the wall, over the Guards' bridge to the Eastern Baily, and so into the street of the hamlet which had grown up below Joyeulx Saber. In the street was a kennel where a very little water made a thread of way through black ooze.

It seemed that she put a good deal of significance in the act which followed, if there could be any witness in a steadfast pair of eyes upon him, in a bosom impatient under breath, or a smile which showed her half amused, half scared, at her own bravery.

'Look now, Lanceilhot,' she warned him, 'I would do more than this for Coldscaur.' One after the other, slow and deliberate, she thrust her feet into the kennel-sludge. The minstrel shuddered to see her ; but before she could prevent him he had knelt down then and there and kissed the mired shoes.

'And I, lady, would do more than that for you,' said Lanceilhot, rising with fouled lips. 'Yet I pray God you may never need it.'

Her eyes were hazy now, her colour all a hot fire. 'Oh, Lanceilhot,' she said, dismayed, 'what have we done ?'

'We have bound each other, madam, each to our service.' Then he took her back in silence, and in silence they stood again in her shady room.

'You must go now,' she said at last. 'Good-bye !'

'Good-bye, my Lady Mabilla !' She gave him her hand, and he held it. So they stood for a little, in a fine tumult each. If the girl had chosen, he had gone. But a girl never does choose in this pass.

'I must go now,' she said again, with a feeble effort to recover her hand.

'Eh ! Yes, yes,' said Paulet. Then silence broke over them anew, and they stood and thrilled.

'Would you like that ring ?' She looked down at her caught hand as she spoke. There was a signet ring on the forefinger.

'Do you give it me, madam ?'

'You may take it if you like.'

If he kissed the finger he drew it from, kissed the ring ; if she was disappointed that he still kept his hold of the hand, she is to be blamed, not he.

Paulet wore a crucifix round his neck—a silver toy on a silver chain. He saw his lady look at it.

'May I give you my Christ, lady ?' he dared. Mabilla looked wise.

'I never wore a crucifix,' she said. 'I do not promise to wear it. But you may give it me as a remembrance, if you will.'

'*Del tempo felice ?*'

'I do not know Italian,' said Mabilla demurely.

She gained the crucifix, regained her hand, and dismissed him, not before it was time.

'I come to you when I am a man, my proud lady.'

'When you are a wise man, Master Paulet,' said she, and looked after him when the door was shut.

Lanceilhot left Joyeulx Saber that sundown.

CHAPTER VII

LANCEILHOT'S PROGRESS

ON a golden evening Lanceilhot trudged out of Joyeulx Saber in a golden mood. He should have been most miserable ; but love is an irrational disorder and now gave him a great heart. Hey, alavi, alavia ! he could serve her wherever he was ; that was his inalienable right, as to love her was another. The man who loved so glorious a lady should himself be something glorious, partaking of her glory. Beneath his doublet, beneath his shirt the signet ring wagged as he went. O miracle of miracles, that he should have borne away such a token from The Proud Lady ! He sang to the lengthening shadows—

‘*Coblas I will devise*
To the light of my lady’s eyes—
Ha ! Colour of paradise
Is the blue beam that flies
Over my path from her eyes !’

And, behold, the abiding hills took on a steady violet hue, and themselves spoke of her tender mood, of the mood of quiet trust in which she had bid him go in peace. ““I will lift up mine

eyes to the hills,"' chanted Lanceilhot like any chorister—'lo, the depths of her ! lo, her essential soul !'

He had some reason to deem himself favoured, for favoured he had been, to judge by the lady's standard. She who set herself higher than the highest, and for tribute however great had nothing but scorn to bestow, had been caught by this pale upstart in a melting mood, had listened, been meek, had leaned towards him. How was this? The answer is that she herself had whipt the spirit into him which she found worthy. If he had gone on with his whining, cringing, craving, she would have driven him out to join the others. But the fact that a poet is first his own lover had saved him. She had spurred his self-esteem, so that he had shown her that, respect her as he might, he respected himself more. He had faced her and taught her also to respect him. He knew nothing of all this, yet had an instinct that to keep his vantage he must go to work his own way. He would go to school. He might as well have gone for a soldier, poor youth. The pen came readier to hand than the sword ; so Saint Save had him.

'I am a poet,' said he to himself, 'and I have a shilling. Good ! I will go to a University.'

Now there was a famous University at Saint Save. He headed for that city to market his shilling.

Saint Save is a fine town to this hour, belfried still, grey and venerable, islanded in green meadows and cinctured by broad streams. You

see in the distance the shadowy contours of the Campflors hills. In Lanceilhot's time it was of the finest—walled, gated, be-domed, possessed of a dozen carillons belonging to as many steeples, of a mother-church with a nave like an elm-tree avenue, and a dome of green tiles ribbed with gold. Its half-score colleges were bowered in trees and dripping with greenery ; it had ranks of plane in the streets, broad grass ramparts cooled by the same shade, open squares, silent courts, where fountains sparkled all day and rippled all night ; it had a Bishop, a Chancellor, many Deans, two monasteries, and modest little cloisters for barefoot brothers of Francis, Dominic, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Though there were gates and wardens of gates, they were not serious, for, as the people said, Saint Save (God rest him) was no soldier, but a deacon and scholar. If the Saint Saviours went out to war, it was with the powers of darkness ; if others came out against them, they must first learn to read. Now, as no soldiers learnt to read in those days, Saint Save had peace.

To the famous College of Leonardsheart went Master Corbet the morning of his arrival, and asked to see the Reverend Prior.

'My young eyess-gentle,' said the porter, 'what is your little affair?'

'I am a poet,' said Lanceilhot, baring his head.

'Then you should hit the humour of the Reverend Prior,' said the porter. 'Your name, Poet ?'

'Lanceilhot Paulet.'

'Of——?'

'Of Plashy in Gloverne ; but now from Joyeulx Saber.'

The porter went at once. After a little he returned, all smiles.

'Pleased to be pained to follow me, Master Paulet.'

Lanceilhot followed him up winding stairs till he was ushered into a breezy library. The sun made the place gay, a wood fire made it cheerful. Before the fire, both gay and cheerful, was a thin-faced, ruddy old man, in skull-cap and part of a cassock. The rest of the cassock was in his hands that his neat legs might hold converse with the fire. The season was June, the place Campflors ; nevertheless the fire did not seem out of place in the long room. The toaster of legs was the Reverend Prior of the College of Leonardsheart.

He looked shrewdly at Lanceilhot as the youth stood rather defiantly posed by the door—shrewdly, but with a humorous twitching at the corner of his mouth.

'Master Paulet,' he said, 'the report comes to me that you are a poet.'

'I am a poet, Reverend Sir.'

'It is a gentle craft. Pray, who taught you to poetise ?'

'The sun, books, Merlin le Hardy, and God the Father,' said Lanceilhot, who was a serious youth.

'Excellent teachers, Master Paulet,' said the Prior. 'At least, I would answer for the last three. Have you any of your compositions with you ?'

'I have them all, Reverend Sir.'

'Ah!' The Prior glanced at the height of the sun; Lanceilhot dived into his wallet.

'Here,' said he, 'is my *Gests of Maximilian, called The Gross*, in eight books. Here is a Tenzon entitled, after its opening line, "The Cry is from the Holy Sepulchre," which hath for argument this consideration: whether, namely, a vow not to wash the hands and face until the Blessed Places are redeemed is a pious vow. Here are—an *alba* to the awakening Soul of the Lady M. de R., a chant-royal to the Forehead and Eyes of the same lady, with another to her Lips and noble Chin. In this little piece of ten verses with a refrain I celebrate her Neck and Bosom; but this composition, so far, no eyes have seen but mine. Here again is a *descortz* wherein I speak of her Hair, and a certain Jewel she is accustomed to wear in it, showing the blessedness of the jewel's estate, the comfort it may be to the hair, and closing with a very bitter lament that I am not the Jewel. Lastly, I have an *alba* and *sereina* to her Hands and Feet, wherein I bend the similitude of the first rose of dawn upon the dewy hills to serve me a good turn. As for her hands, they are naturally the cool palms of evening laid upon the poet's brow. Moreover, here—'

The Reverend Prior put up his hand momentarily. 'Ah, stay, stay, my young friend. Let us consider one thing at a time. You seem to be a poet with a passion for anatomy?'

Lanceilhot corrected him. 'It is hardly to be called a passion, Reverend Sir, since the drift of all

my verse is philosophical and mystical. I should, rather, call it an Intellectual State, a mental Ecstasy. Besides, you forget my *Gests of Maximilian*, an Epic.'

'We will pass by the Epic for the moment,' said the Prior, sitting down. 'Let us consider the Ecstasies. I may, perhaps, conjecture that your "Lady M. de R." and your late resting-place are not distantly connected?'

'They will soon be most distantly connected, Reverend Sir, unhappily. But at the time of writing they were closely connected.'

'The Lady M. de R. is no other than Donna Mabilla de Renny?'

'That is so, Reverend Sir.'

'Ah! Should I now be indiscreet to ask, first, What she thought of your philosophical writings, and, second, What the Lord Bishop of Havilot thought of them?'

Lanceilhot looked very grave. 'I have already hinted, Reverend Sir,' he replied, 'that my writings have frequently been for my private eye. I read the Lord Bishop two books of my *Gests of Maximilian*; but though I remained at Joyeulx Saber near three months, there was no opportunity to continue the poem. As to the other matter of which you inquire, I have never concealed from her or her society my lifelong devotion to Donna Mabilla, that glorious lady.'

The Prior bowed urbanely. 'And now, Master Paulet,' he said, 'may I know to whom, or to what circumstance, I am indebted for the honour of this interview?'

‘ You are indebted, Reverend Sir,’ said Lanceil-hot with great candour, ‘ to the fame of your learning, to the desire I have to benefit by it, and to the fact that Donna Mabilla is about to leave Joyeulx Saber.’

The Prior could not but bow again. ‘ You deal largely in reasons,’ said he. ‘ I should be the last man to deny their cogency, though, in this case, I should lean particularly upon the last. Now, what do you wish to learn of me ? ’

‘ Tongues,’ said Paulet, ‘ and Music, the Aristotelian Ethics, Astronomy and the use of the Globes, Logic, Mathematics——’

‘ Ah, my dear young friend ! cried the Prior, ‘ if you learned so much, no books could hold your *Gests*. Tackle the *Trivium* by way of a beginning. You know Latin ? ’

‘ Yes, Father.’

‘ Good. If you are as serious as you seem, we will make a humanist of you in time. Attending that, however, let me put a delicate question to you.’

‘ I have a shilling,’ said Paulet, who divined him, ‘ and my manuscripts.’

‘ I should imagine that those were for a private collection,’ said the Prior dryly. ‘ We must put you upon our foundation, where, luckily, there is a vacancy. I myself will nominate you when I have gone more fully into your recommendations.’

‘ I humbly thank you, Reverend Sir. I have letters from the Lord Bishop, from the Abbot of Graindorge, from the Curate of my native town, and others’

'You promise very well, my child,' said the good man. 'But it is the hour of Mass. Will you accompany me?'

Lanceilhot knelt and kissed the Prior's hand, a dextrous and touching homage which did him no harm. The end of it all was that by dusk the youth found himself arrayed in the green gown of his college ; upon the left shoulder the college arms in a bravery of new red and white ; upon a field *argent* two files *gules*, saltirewise, charged with a heart *proper* within a chain *or*.

Saint Save, as everybody knows, was a deacon who suffered martyrdom under the Vandals for the sake of his learning. He was filed to death—hence the University arms. The heart in the chain is, of course, that of Saint Leonard, the famous relic of the College Chapel.

In taking leave for some time of this good youth, it may be sufficient to foreshadow of him that he applied himself with zest to the pursuit of learning, attending the time when he might hope to look his lady in the face again. He was young, time meant nothing to him. His mistress might marry her Don John of Barsaunter ; but at present he was able to contemplate that calmly enough. He had not got beyond the state of wonder in his love-affairs. The fact of loving was nearly all his joy. So he studied, and said his prayers, and wrote verses.

Genius must be denied to Master Paulet ; he was built upon too small a scale to contain that divine fury. What he had for literary equipment was dramatic sympathy, the knack of a quick leap

towards the flame that kindled you—a leap so quick that he would outvie you in the dance of your own fancy, usurp your mood and thereafter lead you. This also he had : a deep fund of self-respect. It had always kept him clean. He was really a modest lad in his dealings with women, a speedy blusher, yet one who drew on by his own drawing-back. Mostly he was invited farther than he dared. Very respectful to all women, when he found the one woman of all the world he slipped sidelong into idolatry. She became his more-than-self. He made her in his own image, then coloured her with the fire she lent him. Mabilla de Renny, the wilful little high lady, became an impossible Goddess, a veiled shining Oracle whose priest he was, seeing that the touch of her finger-tips, the very breath of her presence, made of him a swooning visionary. This was his nearest approach to genius : luckily for him he was soon to be three hundred miles from his inspiration. He applied himself to learning, as Saint Save understood it. All his literature was in the letters he wrote, but wisely did not send, to his mistress. He was bold only in thought ; such of them as he did dare to a messenger gave him cringing fits to think of ; he hardly could bring himself to open the thin replies he got. These, which began hopefully enough with a fairly long letter, grew more and more guarded, cropt, rare, without news. ‘Master Lanceilhot, I am very well in spite of your long letter, and your friend, M. de R.’; or ‘Master Lanceilhot, I pray you to spare me your comments

upon my soul, for which (as I have better reason to know it) I have less respect than you. We have not seen the sun since we left Canhoe. Yestermorn my brother, Messire Bernart, killed a bear. I rejoice to hear of your learned diversions. From your good friend, Mabilla.' Last but one came a very short scribble : 'Master Lanceilhot, I am too much concerned to be more than your faithful, M.' This was of a sort to send him frantic. Of the last of all I must speak in its place, which is not yet.

Tantalising, too brief, too kind little letters ! in return for which he filled quires of sheepskin with fine penmanship. Upon these, however, and upon certain miniatures (obviously from life) which he found in a great brown book—*Faitz et Gestes de la très-noble, très-haulte, miserrime et ancienne Maison de Reini*—pictures in blue and white upon gold of ladies and young knights with proud lips and stiff-poised heads—upon such meat he kept his soul alive while in bondage in the learned courts of Leonardsheart.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RENNYS HEAD FOR THE NORTH

THE Campflors cavalcade—the Bishop in steel, the Viscount in steel, Mabilla in a green hood, Sorges in a tremble, a glancing line of pensels and banneroles, and a train of baggage mules—made Saint Save and fifteen farther miles on their first day. They halted for the night at Kains Castle. This is a place on the edge of Barsaunter, Don John's province, which belonged to a vavasour of his and was much at the service of his friends. Don John, the King's brother, himself was there to entertain them : Noel de Kains, the owner of the place, bent a ready knee to the whole party. There were few things that this Prince John did not know of matters touching his interest, fewer still which he affected to know. Before the Bishop went to his bed he received a formal proposal for Mabilla's marriage. She had been betrothed, as you know, at a baby age, but little further had been moved in the affair for one reason or another.

Whatever her uncle may have felt, he was too much of a Renny to show any elation. Don

John was the King's only brother, by no means out of chances for the throne, a man who might go far. His amours were, at any rate, not flagrant ; he was forty—a sound age ; hot-tempered—but the Rennys could match him there ; fickle in his friendships. Against that set Mabilla. ‘I know no more level-headed woman than that child,’ her uncle considered ; ‘I could see in her a mate for Don John. He has nerves ; I can credit her with none. She might exasperate him into some act of folly and get a permanent ascendancy while he was repenting it.’ On the whole, he was inclined for a bargain with his Prince.

Don John, a gaunt, brown man, with a hide like leather, a starved grin and absurdly long legs, lay like a leaning spear in his chair and watched his companion. His hands were knit behind his head, but he never kept his fingers still. The Bishop sat square as a tower.

‘Your Highness sees how my family is placed by this new turn of affairs,’ he said. ‘The heiress, a minor, is in the hold of that bullock Pikpoyntz. He has in all probability murdered my brother Blaise, his wife and my five hopeful nephews. The fact that he did not add the girl to the heap proves that there was a heap. No doubt he means to marry her at leisure. At that rate Coldscaur, our cradle for five centuries, will go to his issue ; Marvilion will be laid to Pikpoyntz. It is a pretty game, so pretty that I dare not punish the assassin (at present).’

‘You mean, Bishop,’ said Don John, showing

his teeth, ‘that you would defer asking our lord the King to punish?’

The Bishop bowed shortly. ‘I beg your Grace to let me finish. The stake is too serious. It is Coldscaur, it is all Marvilion. We must temporise—get back the heiress if we can. If we are too late, he must have her. But in that case we must work for Marvilion. It should be disentailed. To suffer it to remain would be against public policy—two shires in one thief’s hands! The largest fief in the realm to be held by the biggest thief! *Mort de Dieu!*’

‘And if that were *not* suffered,’ put in Don John, ‘in that case, Lord Bishop——?’

‘In that case, my lord, Marvilion would fall to the next heir.’

‘The estate is a female fief, I understand?’ asked the Prince, twitching at the legs.

The Bishop bowed. He had him. ‘It would fall to your Grace’s betrothed, to my late ward Donna Mabilla, who now, by the law of this land, is of age to take it up.’

‘Ha!’ snapped Don John. ‘Now do me justice, Bishop.’

‘I do so, my Lord Prince. Your Highness’s betrothal was eleven years ago; your Highness’s proposal twenty minutes.’

‘I was in absolute ignorance of all this, Bishop—honour of a Prince!’

‘My lord,’ said Havilot, ‘I am sensible both of that, and of the great honour you pay my House. Again, I beg your Highness to observe how we stand. The Earl of Pikpoyntz must be

supposed (by us at least) to have compromised the heiress. He must marry her. But there should be (even in my judgment who am no politician) a clear understanding that she cannot bring him a whole Province to add to his own. The man is a common assassin. That alone is enough to secure his outlawry under so just a king as our sovereign lord. If he married the heiress and were then outlawed, policy would be served and justice no less secured for being delayed.'

He paused here and looked at his Prince. Don John tapped his teeth. ' You would let him marry the heiress first and proceed to outlaw him afterwards—hey?' The Bishop, still looking keenly at him, nodded.

' If that were done, Donna Mabilla——' said the Prince.

' If that were done, Donna Mabilla becomes Renny of Coldscaur on the instant, my lord,' said the Bishop, not mincing matters. The Prince grinned desperately.

' But, outlawry or none,' went on Havilot, ' there should be a disentail. The Rennys, my lord, have done their share of sword-work in their day ; but girls cannot wield swords, and priests are considered lucky if they can bear croziers. And girls and priests represent Renny ! My girl is well off in a sense, hath no need of an appanage for any common mating. But she must not come naked to a Prince of the blood.'

' Bishop of Havilot,' said Don John very earnestly, ' if I can watch justice done to your family it will be the happiest sight in the world

for my eyes, I assure you.' He blinked and writhed as he spoke.

The Bishop blinked, but did not writhe. 'We ask for justice at your Grace's hands and no more,' said he.

'You shall have justice,' said Don John, rising. 'I will go to Maintsonge to-morrow, and see my brother.' The Bishop kissed his hand and withdrew.

He considered the bargain sufficiently implied. You could hardly get nearer with a Prince of the reigning house. Marvilion, that fair province, with Coldscaur for its inviolate crown, should be Mabilla's in a year, thought he. He decided that he would say nothing of all this to her. She had never spoken of her affianced lord to anybody, had scarcely ever seen the great man since the day when she walked into the chapel a baby and out again a plighted maid. What she thought, what knew, she held. But in her uncle's judgment there was no fear of trouble on her side. Put before her the state of affairs, when they were known to be such and such—trust her, she would be discreet. She was a girl who invited departure from custom; he could depend upon her good sense for no argument, upon her cool head for no sentiment. 'It promises, it promises!' he chuckled, rubbing his smooth hands together. 'Barsaunter is a dry bone for such a running hound as Don John. The savour of Marvilion tilth and pasture will keep his nose to the scent. Besides, he had an eye for the maid. Of such also he should be a pretty judge. I never knew a De-

Flahault flinch at a beauty yet. And if my Mabilla is not a royal little beauty there are none in this holy realm.' His Reverence thereupon went to bed without the assistance of his chaplain, his reader, or his lackeys.

Don John sped them on their way next morning, and then, faithful to his word and interest, himself sped on his. To Mabilla he paid the homage due to a queen of beauty : it had been pretty to see her staid reception of it. He bent his back, he looked like a strung bow in that posture ; he kissed her little fingers, tried his hardest to smile without showing his teeth. Mabilla said very little, yes'd and noed, carefully my-lorded him. At the moment of parting he held her stirrup, later kissed her glove. 'The time will be a vigil until your eyes make me festival, madam,' says he. 'According to the vigil speeds the feast, my lord,' said she. 'Nay, madam,' he urged her, 'but the Saint blesses the devout kneeler.' 'Ah, my lord,' she laughed at him, 'he cannot give him knees !' Trumpet shrilled, the knights shook their spears in salute ; cap in hand the Prince gazed upon his lady's back.

It took the Bishop and his train a fortnight to reach Canhoe in Logres ; but we cannot follow them closely. Their weather was superb, and if scenery had then had its present vogue, the traverse could not have failed of delight. But scenery is a solace of ours, whose business has become our tyrant : to the Bishop of Havilot (master of his deeds), to Viscount Bernart, the country showed so much harbourage for stag and hare ; its sedgy rivers

were there to be hawked over ; its mountain peaks, austere, meditative, communing with the blue, were weather gauges, hinting rain or a spell of dry. The Bishop pondered his plans, the Viscount had an eye for ambushes ; of all the party Mabilla was happiest, neither loving, hating, nor fearing any. She could not have told you why—perhaps she was a heathen without knowing it. The Prince's grinning earnestness, poor Lanceilhot's mystical ecstasies, blew like a flaw from her mind before the salt wind which told her they were never far from the sea. The vagrant clouds bid her thoughts run races, the stretches of bright distance invited her fancy abroad. It was a variegated journey, full of interest to her. Barsaunter passed safely through—a bleak sandy stretch, much of it wasted by the sea-waves—the country gets greener, the mountains begin : you are now in Pascency—see the grey head of Mont Gomeril. Grassy valleys, deep and wet, cropped rolling fells, woods and water in the lowlands, little orchards cut between, ling and blaeberry above ; it is a rich pasturage which seldom belies its name, a country of wind and silence and sheep. Thence by an ever-ascending road you win Logres, all pine woods, heather, and grey rocks. On every rock a castle or town fortified ; the very shepherds here go armed. The first lesson a boy learns is to use the long-bow ; the knife is his by nature. The girls suck blood, it would seem, from their mothers and feed their babies with it from themselves. Such a province is, and must be, dark Logres, ever on the watch against Pikpoyntz its bold neighbour.

There on a grey crag in the midst stands Canhoe,
the head of the Saint Quintin fief, dwelling of
the third Renny heiress, Holdis the golden, and
sometimes of her guardian uncle, Prince-Bishop
Valéric.

CHAPTER IX

DEEDS OF BLANCHMAINS

BUT I return to Speir and a pretty state of things. When Father Sorges, poor quavering soul, had thrown the little lady there into the arms of her page, it would have been Blanchmains's business to keep her there if she had not shown a plain disposition of her own to that end. Renny of the Rennys was Sabine—a hot lover, a rooted hater, a block of inflexible resolve to have her way. *Renie pas Reini* indeed! By this time she was to all seeming the most sumptuous maid the broad world could hold. Voluptuously formed, deep-coloured, glossed like a peach, her eyes the hot blue of Venetian water, her velvet lips so perfect one would fear to kiss lest one might break their frail wonder, her hair at once long and abundant, fine and strong—she was the rich-blooded Renny type carried up to a point, a grave, flawless, fierce-burning image of her cousin Mabilla. Not so adorable, because less woman than pattern of woman, by no means wise, without vivacity or humour or intelligence or wit, she was nevertheless a very woman in this, that she must

love something, and, loving, give all. It was unfortunately Firmin whom she loved and to whom she gave what she did give. She found him trustworthy and built him loveworthy. It might have been a dog, or Blanchmains, or a tree, or Father Sorges, or the Blessed Sacrament in its beginning. It happened to be Firmin. The thing was as artless as crying. Then came along the simpleton Sorges, fired her with shame, and drove her whither we have seen her.

Therefore Master Firmin, the handsome young man, was reigning favourite and received the homage due. It appeared to him that he was a breaker of hearts ; he found it pleasanter than breaking horses, a passive exercise. He erected his fine person or laid his length in a snug chair, then those with hearts to sacrifice came and broke them against him. He was admired by Nitidis at a distance—she was a shy girl ; in the intervals of more serious business he was much with Blanchmains. The discreet maid-of-honour would have played go-between had that been possible ; but little Donna Sabine to all but the page was a smooth rock ; she gave no foothold, nor hint of inlet.

So Blanchmains had to work upon Firmin—to screw him up to the pitch of business. She fed him to make him stout of heart, plied him with good wine to make him heady. She gave him to understand her entirely on his side, and at the same time really served him by keeping Madam Clotilda in the dark. ‘Ah, lady,’ she would say, holding her heart, ‘all I can do is to serve you.

There is my joy!' And serve himself she certainly did, with becks and whispered hints—' My lady is in the rose-garden looking for somebody.' 'The little Queen is pouting at her empty court. Quick, in the Blue Closet!' and so on. She served him with sage advice—' Ply her now, hardy lad ! she leans, she leans !' She kept watch for him, went sentry ; she coughed at the door twice to proclaim Clotilda near, sneezed for Shrike, sang an air when only Nitidis came in sight. At last, on a dark wild night of summer, they two alone on the terrace, all the house blind, ' Go, happy lover, up to the bower !' she breathed in his ear. ' Go, and comfort with apples the sick of love.' This was her crowning stroke ; it was she who provided the ladder of cords ; it was she, endlessly patient, who stood to hearten him as he came breathless down when dawn first trembled.

' Good news ? ' she asked him, thrilling. Firmin reeled against her.

' The best, oh ! the best,' he assured her—' ah, my Saviour, she is mine now ! ' The youth was really moved, hid his face upon Blanchmain's shoulder and cried. She embraced him, gave him a merry kiss between the eyes.

' Now the little hooded God be your friend,' she said, with rich laughter in her tones ; ' friendly he has been this night. Eh, but he levels us all ! '

Firmin looked wondering at the live sky. The spell was still upon him. ' Oh, Blanchmains,' he whispered, feeling for her hand to stay him, ' oh, Blanchmains, my little lady is clean from God. How could I dare ? '

'You know best, my friend,' she answered him, rather drily. 'Experience to teach you was not lacking, if one may believe what one hears.'

'Wantons all!' cried Firmin eloquent. 'Wantons all! But she—so royal, so meek and lovely—O Christ!'

'O Cupid!' said the maid-of-honour. 'Come and tell me everything.' She took him to her closet and poured red wine for him as he rhapsodised.

Firmin was devotional. 'See now, Blanchmains, my dear,' he said, 'I am on holy ground, I must act holily. We were caught unawares—we loved too much—eh, just Heaven, how my dear loves me! She gave herself—she fell here—these arms held her!' He hugged himself, then grew sober. 'Ah, but no more, no more. Never! I must take her to church—I shall burn else—deadly sin! You, Blanchmains, will be our friend; swear that you will. Loathsome villain that I am!'

'Will you wed Renny of Coldscaur, Firmin?' said Blanchmains with parted lips.

Firmin held up his fine head. 'Renny of Coldscaur loves me, mistress. She is royal enough to command it. What else can I do?'

Blanchmains, with a finger to her lips, said, 'Leave it to me.' Firmin went praying to bed.

There was no time to lose: Firmin's virtue might not face such risks as these very long, and, as Blanchmains was shrewd enough to see, the lady loved Firmin, and Firmin for the moment was touched. No time to lose. She did not lose

an hour. Before morning chapel she was in the still-room, tearful, before Dame Clotilda.

The old woman and the young one distrusted each other ; but just now the flood of circumstance whirled them together. The dame overlooked certain flagrant mysteries, the maid stooped to the dame's simplicity. She was soon sitting at the housekeeper's knee, nestling her hand in the other's.

'Ah, mother,' she said, with one of her pretty sighs, 'if my lord could return before it is too late !'

'Is there mischief abroad, child ? Is there mischief about us ?' quavered the timorous old soul. Blanchmains hid her face.

'Speak, girl, speak !' cried the housekeeper. 'Fear nothing. I am discretion itself—so old and worn !'

'Then for once I will speak, mother. You cried of mischief ; it is mischief, I fear. Let me tell you—ah, if I had dared tell you before ! But it may not yet be too late.'

'Mary and Jesus ! Tell me the truth.'

'It is—it is—ah, it is of Firmin I would speak, mother.'

Dame Clotilda crossed herself with great precision. 'Now I am ready for the worst,' said she, and locked her lips. Blanchmains, pale and eager, began to pour out her confession.

'He has got the blind side of the little lady, mother ; he has got the blindest side. She is at his beckon and whistle. He lifts a finger and she lies down ; he lowers an eyebrow and she stands

up. He asks with a wink, she gives him her cheek ; he purses his mouth, she puts up hers. He takes her hand, she lets him hold it. Will he let go, think you ? Ah, no ! For he has hopes of—all. Mother, he will never let go till he has the whole. Mark me, I know. And oh, Heaven and Earth, that such things should be ! ' She hid her face again and with sobs shook her shoulders. Clotilda reeled in her chair.

' Ah, ah ! ' she panted, ' it hath brought on my spasms. Quick, child, my drops, my drops ! ' Blanchmains flew for the phial. Clotilda recovered, crossed herself, and took a resolution.

' This very morn, after Mass, I will speak with my lady,' she said. ' You have done very right, my child, to speak your heart to me. I love you for it—I, who never thought to love you for anything.' Blanchmains offered a meek face to be kissed, and was kissed. The dame went on. ' I will not reproach my lady. I hope I know my place. But as I believe our lord the Earl hath plans of his own in her regard, my duty is plain—first to my lord, at whose cradle I stood when he was a gurgling babe ; next to my little lady, who may be my sovereign lady if his lordship's designs are as I take them ; lastly to that lecherous thief in the Gatehouse, whom I shall live to see swinging yet. Now all this, put as I best know how to put it, breathing duty and service, grievous but yet upright, humility sprinkled over all like a heavenly dew—as God is my Redeemer, this goeth to my lady this day after *Ite missa est*. Leave it to me, my dear.'

The dame leaned back in her chair, wiping her eyes. Blanchmains knelt adoring her.

'Mother,' she said, 'I never knew the blessedness of faithful duty until this moment. Oh, teach me your secret. Be patient with me, I shall yet learn!'

Clotilda enfolded her. 'My dear lamb,' she babbled, 'I've the warmest heart, though old, and 'tis large enough for thee and more. I could love thee, my girl.'

'And I need your love, mother,' said Mistress Blanchmains, asking with eyes and lips for kisses. She got as many as she would.

All fell out in order. The dame's alarms, quavered forth amid sighs, tears, and gaspings, set the quick Renny blood on fire. Sabine, who was indeed royally angry, said very little, being of your dangerously still sort; but what little she did say shrivelled the old woman like a winter leaf. 'Your place, woman, is to convey my orders to the servants, and not theirs to me,' said Sabine. Woman! She had called Dame Clotilda woman! The poor soul scarce knew herself in the term.

Blanchmains herself could not have desired more than what followed. Before the peopled windows, in the blare of the sun, Sabine ran to Firmin on the terrace and hung on his breast. All her outraged pride was crying in her heart; it went to overbrim a river already in flood. None heard what she sobbed at his mouth, though one divined.

'Oh, Firmin, Firmin,' it was, 'marry me, be

my lord ! They slander me, my love ; they dare against me—I have only love and you.'

'Sweet soul,' said Firmin, very much moved. 'I may not gainsay thee—comfort thee, my life.'

Blanchmains stept lightly out on to the terrace, and came and touched her lady on the shoulder. Sabine started and turned her face of flame.

'What is this, Blanchmains ?'

'Dangerous, madam.'

'Do you dare so far ?'

'I dare more for your service, madam.'

'Is this to serve me ?'

'Surely, madam. They watch you from the house.'

Sabine blushed, then recovered herself. 'Well, Blanchmains ?' she asked. Firmin whispered her hotly :

'Trust her, trust her, my queen. She is our good friend.' She urged towards him, doting at his voice ; then checked herself and spoke more freely to the maid. 'What is in your heart, Blanchmains ? Speak it openly.'

'This, madam,' replied the low-voiced girl ; 'I would serve you in all things—further than I can see my way as yet ; but this household is other-minded. They would serve whom they fear most—their lord,—serve him with messengers. The posts are open and many, his whereabout is known at the frontier ; he might be here in a week at need.'

Firmin began to be troubled ; Blanchmains caught him scanning the windows, the lower

terraces, the shadows, for hidden spies. She went on.

‘My lord hath a long arm, a very sudden dreadful arm. He striketh through many, in the dark and unaware. At evening you pray to Our Lady, you lie down, you sleep ; in the morning —Foh ! You lie there gaping, struck secretly. Eh !’—and she shivered—‘do I not know ?’ Firmin grew white ; but Sabine grew red.

‘Enough of mine have been struck by that treacherous thief whom you call your lord,’ said she. ‘Now is the near time for striking again. I am Renny of Coldscaur. And I go to the King.’

‘But will the King help you, madam ?’ said Blanchmains doubtfully. ‘The King hath trouble of his own as I hear.’

‘The King is my cousin,’ said the little lady.

‘Cousin ? Oh, Lady of Graces !’ stammered Firmin, and fell upon his knees.

Sabine fell upon hers before him, her love awake and crying. ‘Never kneel to me, dear lord,’ she murmured. She took his face in her hands and guided him to kiss her mouth. Renny doted !

‘Come in, come in, o’ God’s name !’ cried Blanchmains, ‘or the King will have no cousin by to-morrow.’

‘Go with Blanchmains, my sweet lady,’ Firmin urged her. Sabine obeyed him.

Blanchmains, whose one object was to get her lady away, saw now many difficulties in the way of a wedding. The cousin of the King ! And going to the King with Firmin at her hand ! This was

a risky business ; but Sabine was rooted to it, would not stir without him. ‘I love him,’ she said. ‘I have given him all I have. He is my lord, and I am his wife.’

‘Then, madam,’ said Blanchmains, ‘if it must be it shall be. Let me procure his summary dismissal as the first step in the business.’ Sabine frowned a good deal over this. It savoured of ruse, and the Rennys had the knack of taking straight roads. ‘Very well, madam,’ said Blanchmains, ‘then let me tell you this. You will be stabbed on the third night of leaving this place if you go to work openly. The Earl of Pkipoyntz is lord of this shire ; you his prisoner.’

‘It shall be as you propose,’ said Sabine, after a pause.

Everything was as Blanchmains proposed after this little skirmish. Shrike the Chamberlain obediently gave Firmin his wages and bade him be off. Firmin went to lie hid at Melmerfarrow, a mountain town some twenty miles from Speir. A week was given to the quieting of Dame Clotilda’s spasms ; Bubo, the hunchback, was persuaded to act priest —he had nothing but minor orders to his credit, but Sabine was royally ignorant of such matters. Then one fine morning the little lady, flushed and bright-eyed, rode up the Valley of Stones at a canter, two grooms (one being Bubo) pounding in her track. She sobered down through Melmerfarrow, which is on the shoulder of the mountain and must be climbed ; and three miles beyond it, where the rocks beset the road, she dismounted. She gave her Mass-book to Bubo, bid the other

fellow wait with the horses, and went slowly up the path. Half-way to the top was a little oratory, with a chapel dedicated to Saint Leo—a desert place almost covered with bryony and bramble. Here was Firmin, wet with apprehension, bleeding where he had bitten his lips. The red spot seemed to burn on his white face.

Bubo went in first, lit the candles on the altar and vested for his iniquity. He dared his mockery of Mass ; Sabine alone of the huddled party was unfaltering. Firmin was abject. Yet the thing was done. Bubo returned to his mate below, and Firmin led his bride into the oratory hard by.

It was late before she came down to the horses, dark before she reached Speir.

Next day, at dawn, she set out, cloaked and hooded, to join her lover with all the money she could win together in the flap of her saddle. She went alone, unwatched saved by Blanchmains' restless eyes. She was to meet Firmin at Melmerfarrow and ride for the coast. Thence, as she hoped, a smack would take them to Imber's mouth, if not to Maintsonge, the royal city, itself.

When she was a speck upon the dusty road, the white-faced girl flew up the Priest's steps like a bird. She could hardly conceal her delight ; she called Shrike to her and took his hand in both hers.

‘ My friend,’ she said, ‘ guess now what happened while we were snoring.’

The black gaped at her. ‘ My lord is here ? ’

‘ That which will bring him has been done. The little lady is away.’

‘Good Saints help us !’ cried Shrike, a Christian when moved.

‘Ah, indeed, let them,’ she agreed, seldom moved in that direction. ‘And do you think she has gone alone, my Shrike?’

Shrike grinned and snapped his fingers. ‘Squire Firmin for a hundred pound !’

‘He has found out the way indeed,’ said Blanchmains. Shrike mused. ‘I might have guessed it. I should have guessed it : ’tis quite of my matter. Tut, tut, tut ! I’m a fool, missy, for all my fine brains.’

‘And I with you, Shrike. What now ? Should we cry, Hunt is up ? Should we fetch home the Earl ?’ Shrike showed the whites of his eyes.

‘Ah, missy, missy, never in life ! Eh, the cat, the cat—her head in a trap ! Let her feel the teeth !’ He leapt about, waving his arms and letting off volleys from his fingers. Soon he sobered.

‘Who’s to face the Earl, missy ? Who shall beard him ?’ She took it coolly.

‘You or I, Shrike. He is not due yet—time enough. He should come home by Cantacute, or he may risk Fauconbridge. Stay you here, friend ; meet him boldly when he comes, and never fail of your story. Listen. They went off separately—he dismissed for his liberties taken, she after solemn warning from Clotilda and me and you. Give up Bubo’s crooked neck, if you choose. But above all, never flinch. I carry the same tale down to Cantacute this very night. Never speak a word to Clotilda—be as ignorant as she is ; never so

much as look at Nitidis. If she guessed she'd coax it out of you in a corner—for you are jelly with women, good Shrike. Remember, and all will be well. Good-bye.'

The more Shrike thought of it the more he liked it. His enemy had struck herself lower than he could ever have got her. Lord, Lord, what a tale he could make of it! He was not a man of feeling for nothing. Dame Clotilda, in high alarms, urged a pursuit. It was easy to hoodwink her with half-a-dozen tales of failure. She relapsed into fearful imbecility, and Shrike, waiting, hugged his treasure. Blanchmains was in a Cantacute bed by the next morning, having done her fifty miles on end. She need not have lathered her horse ; the Earl was not expected for a couple of weeks. But he had sent on Frélus, his lieutenant, with the bulk of his troops. Frélus and Blanchmains were old friends.

CHAPTER X

BETWEEN CAMPFLORS AND CANHOE

To his glorious lady, the Lady Mabilla de Renny, at Canhoe—this, for pity.

Spell over the whispers of the wind, Soul of my soul,
call upon the sea to make more plain his moaning, lean
your cheek against pine-stems that their words may thrill
your ear, lay in your sweet bosom a flower of the heath :
one and all shall declare, Lanceilhot is your true lover. I
sit alone thinking ; yet not alone, for I have your image
in my heart. When it grows dusk, with silence over all
the city, I turn to my heart and say, Open, thou treasure-
house, let forth thy treasure. Then on a beam of soft
light steppeth out Mabilla, in a blue gown. Neck and
arms gleam like moon-rays, pretty head is the moon, and
its cloudy bawdekin is chequered with stars. There
smiling she stands, her daring self, and I fall a-praying.
Thus always goeth my vigil his course. By dawn I am
at my books : 'tis your slim finger points the page. You
lean over my shoulder ; I have your breath, the living
touch of you ; and, 'Ah, God !' I cry, 'let me alone.'
I go to chapel—you hover unseen ; to dinner—I hear
you laugh at the lector's nasal drone. The stifling after-
noons my mates and I spend in class. They yawn and
spur each other under the benches ; but I hold my heart
fast lest you should fly away. Sweet lady, proud lady, let
me kiss the hands that hold my scroll !

News of the West you shall have. There are come letters of array from the Court, that great store of provision be made in granaries and granges against a winter campaign. On what account, whether for crusade or frank adventure, we cannot learn. My lord Don John may be sought in this. He is still with the King, who holds revelry with jousting in the South parts. Two heretic friars have been burned at Cragarn. Here, in public Disputation before the Chancellor and Deans of Colleges, it was debated: *An magno ingenio sit decor Humilitas*, and successfully held against all comers that it was not. I think much of Renny, and at times break into music—but, sweet lady, proud lady, there is but one Renny for your slave.

LANCEILHOT.

To the worthy poet and scholar, Master Lanceilhot Paulet—this, at his lodging at Leonardsheart at Saint Save, by a sure hand.

I will not take the pastimes you advise, good Lanceilhot, for the wind, the sea, the pines and the flowers of heath are my loving friends, and I shun to find them impertinent. You also I should shun by rights, and know not how to do if you write me such letters. Fie then, my friend, remember your vow; cease to protest so much of service and serve me more. Pluck out the little image that lights you to bed. *Tu ne cede malis sed contra audentior ito.* I will give you news, though we burn no friars. My uncle, the Prince-Bishop, I find to be tall and white-handed, a great smiler, fond of ladies, much my servant. Less a Bishop than a Prince, I think, and less a man than either. He would make a good greyhound for the hall: his manners are fine and he will lie at your feet all day. My cousin Hold is also tall, smiles also, is languid and golden-haired. To me she seems idle, but to my brother the Viscount an aureoled saint. Send Heaven he treat her so! for I see he is for storming the altar. She, I think, is inclined for more earthy homage. She is a beautiful lady, very kind to

your friend—for whose sake I say not. We are for the enemy shortly, and should break the Pikpoantz border come Saturday. Already our herald has gone in. You may write to me at Speir, but soberly, I pray you. For this I have a safe messenger, Faunce the reeve, taking writs for the Halimote Court. God be good to you and your friend.

M. DE R.

Postscriptum.—There is great talk here of marrying me to my lord D—— J——. To this I shake the head. God alone knoweth what my destinies are or are not ! If the assassin hath wed my cousin Renny they say she must renounce the fief. It falleth then to me. The greatness of this might tempt me to lift up my head ; yet at times I feel rather that I must bend my knees. Farewell. Pray for your Mabilla.

‘ His ’ Mabilla ! Lanceilhot at Saint Save knelt kissing his letter, with closed aching eyes. Mabilla at the same hour was setting out from Canhoe, hers wide with wonder to see the soaring of her thought. Her heart rose as her thought towered. ‘ Ah, God, the Girdle of Renny, the Robe and the Crown ! And the Crown for me ! ’

The great matter of the Prince’s proposals had, you perceive, been put to her. The marriage which was to lift her level with the throne was not new : in a sense it had grown up with her. Now that it was near and looming she gulped the Prince while thinking of the principality. Marvilion ! That stately shire, never seen, imaged on that account the more dim-horizoned, having castles and broad forests and fair cities within it—Cap-Dieu and Minster Merrow, Fording-cross and Renny Helm ;—having above all that wooded

bluff whereon stood, tower by tower, the great hold of the Rennys. All this to be hers ! And she ? She heard the shattering trumpets, then her style :—*Très-haulte, très-puissante, renommée Princesse, Ma Dame Mabilla, par la grâce de Dieu Reini de Coldscaur, Dame de Marvilion, cousine de la Vierge Marie, cousine du Roy.* Investiture, the golden chain, the solitary glory, her name ennobling her fief—ah, well to say, Pray for Mabilla ! She lifted her high little head and clear-eyed fronted the East, where Speir and the enemy of her house stared at the sky from their misty crags. She drew a deep breath, her quick blood leapt in her cheeks, she spurred forward beyond the troop. In and out of the dewy pinewoods which cover Logres like a curtain she led the way, and between her parted lips sucked in the great air. She gathered strength with effort ; it was not all her fancy which showed the prelates her uncles, and the rest of the train, subservient to her humour. They, poor souls, were feeding in her the pride which had always been Renny's undoing. The dome of the Renny crown dazzled them all alike.

CHAPTER XI

PIKPOYNTZ MUSTERS

You may judge Blanchmains as you will, but her spirit shall be judged by the fact that she waited for her lord in the Council Chamber at Cantacute in the full expectation that she would never leave the place alive. She thought he would probably strangle her, since she was a woman. With men she knew his way—a crashing blow from his fist in full fore-head, and down went the victim like a steer. He was no stabber, this Earl, carried nothing into battle but his axe ; but his fists were like bludgeons. The girl must have had courage, for though she valued that slim white throat of hers above the whole world, she determined, in her panic, to face what she had reasoned out in cold blood. ‘It is a matter of nerves, I fancy,’ she said to herself, ‘since it is not my death but the shock of his rage I fear.’ The blank look, the driving storm besetting his wild eyes, those awful swelling veins in his block of a neck, the working mouth of him ! She had seen him transfigured by rage to a wild beast : she owned to shirking that. Nevertheless she waited, and when he came, spoke.

At first it had been as if her dreads were prophecies. The hulking red fellow had lurched against the door, then with a howl of broken gutturals sprung forward, caught her by the shoulders, and pinned her to the wall. Blanchmains quavered, ‘Ah, mercy, mercy !’

‘Mercy, bastard !’ he raved, shaking her as a dog a rat. ‘This is your work, and by Hell you shall pay for it.’ His great hands slid up her shoulders, in another moment they would hook at her neck. She staked everything on the last throw. ‘Fool !’ she shrieked at him. ‘What am I here for ? You will be too late and learn nothing !’

The shot told. Pikpoyntz dropped her, and himself dropped into his chair, panting. He stared before him out of starting red eyes, a foam on the beard about his lips. He let the girl pick herself up without an effort to help her. She got on to her feet and stood before him, struggling to master her breath. He took no notice of her, but went on working his tongue and opening and shutting his hairy hands.

When she was mistress of her words and breath, she said her say, said it admirably, defending none, accusing none. The Earl sucked it in, and much of his rage with it. His grunts became fewer, his threats of wild death against all and sundry ceased. He began to look at Blanchmains again—watching the movements of her gown as she stood before him. There was still a deep cleft between his brows, his fingers still tore at his beard ; but the spell worked. When he sent her for a horn of drink she knew she had won him. She fetched

it herself, mixed it, held it over her head in front of him, curtsied for a sip, and took it smiling at him with her merry eyes over the brim. Then, when he had drained it dry, she sat on the arm of his chair, with her elbow on his leather-cased shoulder. He let her be there. She was exactly the Dalilah of this fire-red Samson.

‘Well?’ he grunted at length. ‘What shuffles will you try with me now?’ She laughed low.

‘Later, my Earl, later!’

‘I must think, monkey. Off with you.’

‘No, no, let me stay!’ And she touched his head. ‘Let me stay: it is three years. Look now, how white I have kept my hands for you.’

He glanced over his shoulder at her held-up hands. ‘Chalk-white, by the Holy Face!’

‘You may kiss them, my red lord.’

‘I have no taste for kisses now, but by Heaven I can’t resist you. Come here.’

She settled herself in his arms, but was careful to give less than he asked. Soon she sat up. ‘Love-making enough, my king. Affairs wait.’

‘Talk then, you black cat.’

‘Listen. The Rennys will be at Speir before long. Their herald has come.’

‘I have seen the fellow,’ said the Earl; ‘leave the Rennys alone. Can we catch this Mistress Firmin?’

‘We failed after she had been gone a day. She is at sea.’

‘Who dared marry them?’

‘They are not married, my lord.’

‘How do you know that, girl?’

‘I had it from Bubo.’

‘Bubo? That toad? Was he in their counsels?’

‘Ask him, my Earl.’

‘I will, by God!’

‘All works well for you, my lord. You still hold the fief for your ward, taint or no taint.’

‘You are a fool, monkey. If she is not married, she may yet marry.’

‘It is your lordship is the fool, not your poor girl. I know that little pig-head. She will never leave her minion.’

‘How am I to do, then?’

‘Sweet Virgin, how slow men can be! You shall get him to leave her.’ Pikpoyntz clasped her.

‘I take you, my sweet monkey. Slow and certain am I. You shall deal with him. He will follow you.’

‘He shall follow me to Coldscaur, and she him. Then——’

‘Ah, ah!’ came deep and slow from Pikpoyntz — ‘and then——’

She took his great face in her hands and forced him to look at her.

‘Earl of Pikpoyntz, Renny of Coldscaur, Lord of Marvilion!’ she cried—and to herself she said—‘And I the Countess, O Saviour!’ She and her thought were smothered in kisses.

‘My boy-girl!’ he laughed in a rapture, ‘you have a sweet soft body, but a steel brain, by Our Lord!’

‘No compliments, O my King of the North. Advise.’

'I will advise,' said he. 'I do more ; I order. To-morrow you and Frélus shall go to Coldscaur. You shall have a treasury, an army—what you will. Set the cage fair, and then decoy the bird for it.'

'That will be easy. They have no money. They are going to the King.'

'They mustn't find him, Blanchmains.'

'They will not. Leave it to me. Renny shall be at Coldscaur under your hand.'

'By the Cross, you are a witch !' He caught her up and held her like a baby in mid-air. 'Come, my monkey. I have you till to-morrow ; and then to work.'

Blanchmains, with Frélus and his troop, rode South to Coldscaur next day, as pretty a piece in a game of diamond cut diamond as you ever saw. She had hoodwinked her huge lover, no doubt ; yet she had been as blind as he. If she, for instance, had known as much of the Rennys as he did, she would not have been in such a hurry to go to Coldscaur. Nor would she have been pleased to understand that her Earl was fully as anxious to get her there as she was to go. Thus diamond cut diamond, as I say. Blanchmains had got rid of Sabine, and believed the way now clear to Coldscaur ; but her master knew better. Sabine was not the only marriageable Renny by any means. And if there was still marrying of heiresses to be done, Blanchmains was best out of the way. It was not the Earl's intention that she should ever see Speir again until he was master of Marvilion *jure uxoris*.

So soon as she was well away to the South, the Earl himself rode North to Beauchef, where dwelt his aunt the Countess of Gru. She was a hideous old lady, very rich, wrinkled, bearded and wicked-eyed ; but she was full of spirit and had grown old in courts. He trusted her.

‘ My lady Aunt,’ said he, ‘ two or three years ago, as you will remember, I fell foul of Renny. We came to blows ; he got the worst of the scuffle, and I got the heiress. It was time I married—whom better than her ? Yes, yes ; but now the little rogue has given me the slip while I have been nursing her inheritance ; she is off with one of my esquires—deuce knows whither. She has done for herself, as you will see when I tell you that she believes herself a wife ; but meantime she has nearly done for me. My petition of Wardship and Marriage is still with the King ; the Renny bishops with the Renny heiresses-expectant are at my gates : what is to be done ? I need not tell you that Blaise Renny was a poisonous beast. Did you ever know one of that race who was not ? ’

‘ Nephew,’ said the Countess of Gru, ‘ you need not tell me anything further. If I am to help you, the less I know of your doings the better. Go away and let me think.’ She shut her twinkling eyes and began to twiddle her thumbs in the way she had. The Earl bowed himself out of her chamber.

The old Countess continued to blink and turn thumb over thumb for nearly an hour. Then, touching a hand-bell, to the page who appeared

she said, ‘Send my nephew to me.’ The Earl poked his red head in at the door before the youth had turned to find him. He had been waiting outside.

‘Nephew,’ said she, her eyes tight shut, ‘I have two ends to serve in this business—yours and your honour’s. We will not inquire why these ends are two instead of one ; I hope I know what is due to my family, and it would be very strange if I had forgotten my manners. I must try to accommodate both. Your present interest is clearly to get that girl back into Coldscaur. She is to be your ward ; you will have the marrying of her (for what it is worth) ; and, mind you, you will never hold the lands without her. Now I will tell you the whole of my thought. You will do well to look rather carefully at the heiress-expectant ; further, you must humour their Reverences the bishops, and convince them (if you can) of your honesty. May I say that I had rather that your task than mine ? I am an old woman, Pikpoyntz, soon tired. Now let me deal with the interests of honour. I understand that the two Renny cousins are coming with their uncles. Very right and proper. These great people know what is due to the head of their house ; for head the little runagate is, rascal or no rascal. The girls are brought in, plainly, to serve about their young cousin and chief, to make a court for her. Well ! they will not find her. They will find you instead—a poor exchange, let me add. I know something of your state at Speir, Pikpoyntz ; but I see what I choose to see. The thing will never do. Have you still that white-faced baggage in the house ?’

The Countess of Gru suddenly opened her little eyes and shot them so piercingly at her nephew that the great man shifted his feet.

'Mistress Blanchmains has gone to Coldscaur, my lady,' he said.

'Then,' replied the Countess briskly, 'I will go to Speir myself to receive these ladies. I know what is due. The Rennys may be black-hearted, murdering dogs; but they are the Salt of the earth, and at least chiefly murder each other. As for you, my friend, you will stay away at Cantacute, and not come to Speir until I send for you. Now you may go.'

The Earl kissed his aunt's hand and rode away, very well pleased with his affairs.

That is why the cavalcade from Canhoe, when it had wound its way up the long road that twice encircles before it reaches the walls of Speir, was received with great ceremony at the Outer Gate, with guard of honour, cloth of estate, squires and ladies, a herd of servants and three heralds. Havilot frowned and Grand-Fé smiled awry; but fine manners prevailed. Each put on the best face he could when he found himself welcomed in the Hall by the old Countess of Gru, leaning upon her crutched staff, venerable in brocade. 'Ah, my lord Prince-Bishop, I am fortunate to greet a friend,' said she, with a stately little droop of the body. The Prince-Bishop, who knew her well, did her reverence. Bishop Stephen, whom he presented, bowed stiffly. The Countess saw him glare about for his niece and chieftain. 'You

have two nieces to account for to me, Lord Bishop,' she said—as hardy as an old thief—'before I account for the other. Let us know each other.' The Prince-Bishop interposed, led up Mabilla by the hand. 'It is the privilege of an older friend, my lady,' said he. 'This is my niece Mabilla from the West. Let wit bow to wisdom.' Mabilla curtsied; the Countess tapped her cheek on the recovery. 'I hope you are as good as you are handsome, my dear,' says she. Mabilla hoped that the old lady, for her part, might be better. 'I shall try to prove it to your ladyship,' she answered, staidly enough. The Countess was delighted. 'I will believe whatever you tell me, my dear,' she said. 'Give me a kiss, if you please.' To the tall Donna Hold's curtsey she was civil, but proffered no kisses. 'A lazy fool,' was her private commentary. Viscount Bernart kissed hands.

But the Bishop of Havilot was no longer to be denied. 'Madam,' he said, 'I pray you to excuse my bluntness. We are not here for our delight, but in the first place to do homage to my niece, Renny of Coldscaur, and in the next to agree betwixt her and my lord of Pikpoyntz, as she may require of us. So far, we can serve neither business; but one at least may be speedily done.'

Though her head shook, though she blinked her sharp eyes, the old lady was his match. She moistened her lips, and then said her say deliberately.

'Your niece, Bishop of Havilot, has chosen of her own will to leave this house. My nephew,

the Earl of Pikpoyntz, would have been here but that he is searching for her. He will help you to all his knowledge as soon as he can.' Shaking like a leaf, but with a most dauntless eye, the little eldritch figure faced her enemies. The armed force still massed in the courtyard could have sacked the Castle—for by her orders there were no more than fifty swords in the whole of it ;—yet she was mistress there. Mabilla (greatly enamoured of courage) admired her silently ; but Bishop Stephen broke out again.

' By the Rood, my lady, but this is a weighty message,' he said in his ringing voice, ' and needs an answer too weighty for your ladyship's ears.'

' An ear to accord in weight shall be lent it, my lord,' cried the old Countess ; and then—' My ladies, my lords, the news is indeed heavy. You must help an old woman to bear the weight of it. But not now, not in riding gear. In the absence of my nephew, the Earl, I beg you to consider that you are my guests, as welcome as you will allow me to make you. Till the hour of supper, mesdames ; my lords, I leave you with my officers. The Chamberlain shall see to your retinue.'

She bowed them right and left away. So she held the field.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSIONS AT SPEIR

GOING upstairs between the ranked serving-women, Mabilla encountered at the head of them the appealing gaze of Nitidis—appeal with that adoration added which is always a flattery.

‘That girl has kind eyes,’ thought the lady, and stopping, touched her arm. ‘Will you come and serve me, child?’ said she.

‘Pray you, my lady,’ replied Nitidis with a falter, and followed.

She dismissed her own women and, as soon as they were gone, turned to the trembler with a cheerful friendly face and a hand on each shoulder. The two were much of a height, but Mabilla had the ways as well as the ensignia of a tall girl. ‘Now, my child,’ says she, ‘come tell me all about my cousin Renny.’

The maid-of-honour curtsied; Mabilla slipped an arm round her waist and led her to the window-seat. They sat together thus knit.

‘What is your name, child?’

‘Nitidis, my lady,’ said the maid, quick-touched by the familiar use.

'Well, Nitidis, tell me everything from the beginning.'

Nitidis, dewy-eyed, ardent and voluble, emptied herself of confidence after confidence—fact, surmise, deduction, imagination, analogy. It was a hotch-potch, savoursome if confused. The 'dead man's daughter' who was to 'want for nothing,' the ominous name, Sabine; the royal observances of the lady who uncovered before God and made men uncover before her, the lonely table in hall, her cold silent ways; her sublime unconcern with the terrible Earl, then the ministrations of Sorges, the letters of Pikpoyntz, the approaching communion, Dame Clotilda solicitous, Shrike abject; all this made for the enemy's enhancing, proved that if he was an enemy he was a courteous enemy. Mabilla pictured a captive princess—wistful figure; but Pikpoyntz stood behind her deferential. The sketch pleased; but she required to be convinced. She was a girl who more distrusted her emotional side than despised it.

When Nitidis stopped—for want of breath, not zeal—the cross-questioning began. 'The design is good,' thought Mabilla; 'now I must dig for the foundations.'

'Was Renny unhappy, Nitidis, do you think?'

'I cannot say, my lady; she never spoke to me of her thoughts. She was the quietest little lady you ever saw—for hours, ah, days! she never spoke except to command.'

'She spoke with nobody?'

'There was but one.'

'To whom did she speak ? '

'To Firmin, my lady.'

'Ah, to Firmin ! Leave Firmin for the present. Did she ever speak to your lord ? '

'Eh, but I have told you, my lady.'

'Nor saw him again after the day she was brought to him ? '

'No, my lady.'

'Were you one of her women, Nitidis ? Whom else had she ? '

'She had me, my lady, and Blanchmains.'

'Blanchmains ? Where is Blanchmains ? '

'I cannot tell you, my lady. She went to my lord at Cantacute.'

'Did my cousin ever speak with Blanchmains ? '

'Ah, no, my lady. At least, not until the end. She did not like Blanchmains.'

'Ah. Do you like Blanchmains, Nitidis ? '

The girl started, then blushed, then looked down. 'Yes, my lady. I love Blanchmains.'

'Who is Blanchmains, Nitidis ? '

'I cannot tell you, my lady. She is said to be daughter of a great man ; but I never heard her speak of him—nor of her mother.'

'Ah,' said Mabilla again. 'Oh' and 'Ah,' in infinite variety, are the staple of Campflops language, and run the whole gamut of the passions. After a frowning interval she said, 'Tell me what Blanchmains is to look at.'

'She is a thin girl, my lady, with black hair and eyes and a white face. She has very pretty hands and a soft voice. She was always very kind to me.'

'And were you kind to her, Nitidis?'

Nitidis wondered. 'I, my lady?' she asked.
'I love her. She was very kind to me.'

'You love easily, child?'

'I love those who are kind, my lady.'

'Will you love me, if I am kind?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'Then I will be most kind. Now tell me about Firmin, please.'

Firmin also took on a gentler hue under the simple girl's recital. It appeared that he was of honourable birth, of handsome face, of great strength and courage, very circumspect. It appeared that the lady certainly led him on. In fine, he seemed a tall, blunt, honest youth who had won his prize upon his merits. 'Upon my word,' thought Mabilla, 'cousin Renny may have been justified.' And she remembered that Renny of Coldscaur was not the only high-born lady adored from below. Upon her own bosom, at that moment, lay a letter. 'Sweet lady, proud lady!' was the burthen of it: the whole was vocal of a hot heart, no higher blooded than Firmin's, she was sure. And if the letter of a Lanceilhot could be so favoured by one Renny, why not the service of a Firmin by another? Poor foolish boy! sighed she, and determined to burn her letter.

The fugitives fled to the coast, she learned, intending to get a smack which would take them to Maintsonge, where the King was. They must have reached it by now, must be at sea. But they had very little money, and even less

ability to husband what they had ; so Mabilla judged.

'Thank you, Nitidis,' she said at the end ; 'I shall not forget that we are to be friends.'

'Oh, my lady, my lady !' cried the warm-hearted girl, in tears. 'I would give all I have to see her safe !' Mabilla was touched.

'You are a good girl, Nitidis, and shall have that reward. You shall see her safe, and I will show her to you safe. You may kiss my hand, if you please.'

'Please you, my lady,' said Nitidis, kneeling for the grace.

The days passed by without news of Renny or sight of the Red Earl. Bishop Valéric trimmed his nails all the morning, and learned the resources of Speir by a question hazarded here and there ; Viscount Bernart watched the beautiful Donna Hold ; the beautiful Donna Hold affected not to be aware of him ; such talk as there was between them was full of reservations which charged 'Yes' and 'No,' and 'Are you well?' with fire. Bishop Stephen, with two esquires, roamed the waste places seeking somebody to kill ; he saw nothing but birds and sorry sheep. Mabilla was much with the Countess of Gru. Out of the stores of a very fruitful experience that old lady fed her young friend. She plied her with this food for a week. Frankly, she was delighted with the girl. 'My dear,' she said, when they were pretty familiar, 'I tell you plainly that if your string of ancestors had had as much between them as you

have in one sparkle of your blue eye, there would have been no legend about the marriage-bed. The trouble would have been to keep it empty. No, no. I grant your greatness. I give you (if you must have him) your Pompilius Arrhenis the Roman Consul ; I give you your besotted pride, your fighting qualities ; I will allow (under protest) your consanguinity with Our Lady the Virgin ; but a grain of your wit would have prevented your slaughtering each other like so many pigs in a pen. Look at my nephew Pikpoyntz. By no means a man of fine intelligence—but at least he kills strangers !' Mabilla admitted the respectability of this trait. The Countess tackled Don John. 'So you are to marry the Prince ? I know his Grace very well. I may yet kiss your hand as my sovereign lady. The King's is bad blood—rotten blood. But we women have to learn that our husbands are counters in a game. At first we think they are the game itself. You will find Don John an equivocal counter. He is too womanish for you—not to be depended upon.' 'But I do not intend to depend upon him, Countess,' Mabilla objected ; 'I shall depend upon myself.' 'So you may think, my dear. In that case you will find that you will be the counter and Don John the player. He will depend upon you. Pikpoyntz, now, is a rock. You may quarry in him for ever. Perhaps you will not get much gold ; but you will get no rubbish. You might mend the Constitution with my nephew's head.'

Mabilla, like all girls blessed with humour, was only half blessed. She knew not the happiness of

laughing for pity, but could seize a jest well enough that had a sting in it. She laughed now ; and the Countess took another turn. ‘ I respect the clergy, my dear,’ said the old lady, ‘ without pretending that they inspire me. If they are manly I think, ’Tis pity you are a priest, my fine fellow ! If they are sacerdotal my thought runs, God ! send me a man to deal with ! They are either men spoiled or spoilt men—matter of pity or disgust. No offence to their lordships your kinsmen—with whom I observe you have not yet picked a quarrel : one at least of them hath a bold heart. But, you will see, they will take a prejudiced view of this affair of yours. Ah, well ! When my red-headed nephew comes, my great, heavy-handed, blundering Pikpoyntz, do you know what I shall do, child ? I shall tap you on the shoulder and say in your ear, lock up your chattels, your jewels, your virginity ; down with your portcullis, out with your fascines of defence, cry, “ Ah, saints ! ” or “ Misericorde ! ” but behold, a Man ! ’

‘ I am not sure that I greatly desire to behold such a man as this, Countess,’ said Mabilla with a crook in her brows. She had so far kept an open mind upon the Earl of Pikpoyntz. The Countess laughed pleasantly.

‘ All young maids desire to behold such a man, though few confess it. But my thought was this —To conclude this business you are come upon, a man of that sort is much to be desired. Whom have you ? Your half-brother ? An unblooded boy ! Bishop Stephen ? A hot-headed priest !

Bishop Valéric? A soft-headed priest! I declare, child, 'tis you who should debate this affair with Pikpoyntz! I would take your side. What is it, after all? A border fray, one of a dozen. Renny raids Pikpoyntz, Pikpoyntz raids Renny — the black cattle spend their nights crossing the passes. There has been war on our southern mark since my great-great-grandfather Rollo came over the sea. Speir has been gutted with fire; now it is the turn of Coldscaur. To-morrow it will be Speir again, unless a wise little lady of my acquaintance chooses otherwise. But how shall we drum this into Uncle Stephen's mad head? Pshaw! As well try to drive the Sâr into a saucepan. Well, there will be hot words—and pray Heaven no worse. As for your little cousin, the present Renny by the grace of God—she has taken her part. You know how much *she* has elected to do for the sake of your inheritance. Enough! Kiss me, child! I am tired and must go to sleep.'

That evening, however, the Countess of Gru sent word to the Earl of Pikpoyntz that he might come up.

He rode in next evening with considerable state, but none saw him till the hour of supper. The Bishops were out hunting, and the Viscount was kissing Holdis's hand. 'Mabilla, child,' said the old Countess of Gru, 'this night I show you a man. Run away now and be dressed; then come for me, and we will go down together.'

Nitidis, as the custom had grown to be, dressed her. 'The Earl your master is here, child,' said

the mistress. ‘Yes, my lady,’ whispered the maid.

‘Has he frightened your voice away, Nitidis?’

‘He is terrible, my lady, when he is crossed.’

‘What has crossed him now?’

‘The Lady Renny, my lady.’

‘Ah! Let me now see what I can do.’

Then she attended the Countess of Gru, and together they went down the great stairway.

The great stairway is very broad, and Mabilla by no means filled it; yet as she came down, stiff and arrowy beside the hobbling old witch on her arm, she looked a little queen. Bright green velvet was her gown, stamped across the breast with her badge of a White Hart and her motto in Gothic letters, *Plustost Reini qe Reina*. Her head was carried proudly; her hair, pulled upward from the nape of her neck, carried it yet higher. The little glittering crown seemed hers by right, the strung emeralds round her neck to be burning in drifted snow. Serious, reflecting eyes, a tint of rose, a mouth of serious curves: blinking Pkipoyntz, by the fire, devoured her with his eyes. ‘By God, what a maid for me!’ The later golden vision of Donna Hold, smiling, more rosy than her cousin, more tenderly a beauty, did not stir him from his first dream. ‘I like a stiff girl,’ he thought, ‘that is a slip of willow, easy to bend, nothing to break. But the other—burning frost—*Mort dieu!* she’d queen it among the gods!’

The Countess presented her nephew. The great fire-tinged head bent over her hand. The salutations over, she raised her grave eyes towards

his and set him blinking again. So by her candid look she urged him to speak.

‘I am ashamed to come before you, madam.’

‘I can believe it, my lord.’

‘I have failed in my duty to my dead enemy. Yet I have searched two whole shires to find her. While I was making ready her own house, she left mine.’

‘What need had her house of making ready, my lord?’

‘There had been war.’

‘That is what I wish to know. Was it war, my lord, or——?’

Pikpoyntz raised his voice and hand.

‘I cry to all witness it was war.’

‘Let all hear you that can,’ said Mabilla; ‘I hear you.’

‘Do you believe me?’

‘There are none left to gainsay you, my lord.’ She kept very cool: he redoubled his protestation.

‘There is one, madam. It is she whom I have sought, and still seek. Her house is ready, her lands are at peace.’

Mabilla still watched him unwinking. Pikpoyntz could not so compose his eyes. But he waited. Then she said again in a very grave voice, ‘It was war? And Renny fell?’

‘It was war,’ said the Earl in his beard, ‘and he fell.’

The pause that followed was broken by a trumpet outside. The great doors were thrown open; the dark showed gashed by torchlight and its gleam on iron. Then came the clatter of dis-

mount, and then the Bishop of Havilot strode up the hall. After him came his taller brother, booted but not armed ; then Viscount Bernart, who had been to the gates to meet them.

Havilot and the Earl met midway and stood and watched each other.

‘At last, Earl of Pikpoyntz !’

‘At your service, Bishop of Havilot.’

‘The soonest is the best, my lord.’

‘Then that is now,’ said the Earl.

He returned to the ladies by the fire. ‘Mesdames, affairs will detain my lords and me. I pray you go to supper. My lady of Gru will be châtelaine. Mesdames, I will pay my debt to you when I have earned the right.’ Turning to the enemy he said, ‘Now, my lords,’ and led the way to his Audience Chamber. Bifrons and Quern, two of his captains, and Beausobre, his secretary, attended him. The Bishops had theirs, and the Viscount a young esquire of his household.

Pikpoyntz took the lead of affairs so soon as he was seated in his chair.

‘My lords,’ he said, ‘you will have learned that the news which disturbed your lordships came upon me with equal shock. I came back to my lands at the time you set foot upon them ; and what to you was one cross the more to me was a disaster, a blow at once to my ambitions and my honour. I will be frank with you, my lords. There had been bad blood between the dead chieftain of your house and myself for many years. I will not heap upon the dead the burden of reproach his fore-fathers may have left him, nor will I bring a

charge where there is none now to rise and give me the lie. I will say this, my lords. War broke out upon our borders where it had smouldered in my father's time. If I worked to prevent it, it availeth me little now—seeing it is waged and over. It was an honourable, equal war. I am not unknown as a captain; your lordships know the report of Blaise de Renny. If I beat him it was not his fault: I take leave to say it was my merit. Beat him I did, in a fair field, more than once. In a fair field he fell, and with him fell his heir, young Blaise. Do you blame me that I slew a child? My lords, how will you advise a bolt where it shall fall? How whisper in the arrow's ear, "Save the young man's life, he is Renny's heir"? Enough of this. As it was with Blaise and young Blaise, so it was with the others. They died on the walls of their house. They were buried together, honourably, in the Minster at Renny Helm, and the monument of their greatness, of their valour and unhappy death, is there to testify that Gernulf of Pikpoyntz is no lurking enemy. I am not one that stabs, my lord. I work in the open. Mary de Renny slew herself before my eyes. No sharper slid the knife to her heart than to mine. Thus they fell all, save a child. And fairly I say, and fairly tell your lordships, she fell to me with the lands and castles I had won. She was my ward, I had the marrying of her. For four years she has been my faithful charge, wanting for nothing; queen of my lands and her own, queen of Marvilion and Pikpoyntz now finally at peace. If you doubt of this, if you

think I lie, ask my secretary, ask my servants, ask the whole shire : they will answer you.'

The Prince-Bishop waved his hand ; but Bishop Stephen folded his arms. The Earl went on.

'I thank my lord the Prince-Bishop. I will now go further with your lordships. This last news has murdered my hopes, for in Renny of Coldscaur I have lost the best witness I could have, the daughter of my beaten foe. More than that. I am of those, my lords, who make too much war to love it and see too little of Peace to weary of her. There was a way open to comfort the borders, to build up my house, to mend the breach in Renny's house, to win honour with justice, and the reward of toil. Our hating houses might have been one. What ! you cry at me, you will make Marvilion and Pikpoyntz one earldom ? To that I say, True : but I make your kinswoman my Countess, and my son shall be equal de Renny and de Salas.'

'Never while I live,' muttered the Bishop of Havilot ; 'never while you can die, you dog.'

'My lords,' said Pikpoyntz, 'I will make an end. If I have warred, it has been forced upon me. If I have prevailed, it is God who giveth the victory. If my enemy has fallen, it is an open fate of soldiers. If I could have amended his mishaps and redeemed his loss, but now am frustrate—once more it is God's disposition of us. In blaming me you reproach your Maker.'

The Earl of Pikpoyntz, a great hand on each knee, sat still, watching the effect of his speech.

It was not easy to be seen, this effect ; because Bishop Valéric had kept the command of his face, and Bishop Stephen had never had it from the moment of their first confronting. Yet Havilot, when he sprang up to speak, spoke (for very different reasons) the mind of both.

'Earl of Pikpoyntz,' said he, with the fever of rage ill-concealed, 'your words are fair, but there are no facts to bear them up. This witness you offer us is no witness at all. The only witness is gone. Until she is here—the head of my house—I shall say nothing. Produce her. You say that you have Wardship, that you have Marriage. We will speak of that when I can believe that there is a ward to be warded or a maid to marry.'

'There is a ward for wardship, my good lord,' said Pikpoyntz, choosing his words ; 'but, upon my life, there is no maid.' Havilot glared ; Grand-Fé interposed.

'You mean, my lord, that she has married herself to this Firmin ?'

'I did not say so, my lord Prince.'

'What is this ?' cried Havilot with an oath.

'The holy truth, my lord,' Pikpoyntz answered, steady as a rock. 'She thought to have married Firmin ; but either Firmin dared not, or he cared not. They are not wedded.'

'You lie, Pikpoyntz,' said the Bishop of Havilot deliberately. The Earl started and touched the handle of his sword. Then he checked himself. Turning to one of his men, he said, 'Go fetch me Bubo the page.'

Bubo's panic of confession was wrung from him by his roaring lord. Firmin's threats, bribes, and what not had driven him to his deed. He had shammed priest. Their lordships could see what he was, a poor hunchback. He clung to the most merciful feet he saw and howled for their mercy. They were the young feet of Bernart of Joyeux Saber, and would have sheltered him perhaps if they had dared; but as it was, Pikpoyntz spurned him out of the chamber, and turned to Havilot.

'Is this witness enough, lord Bishop?'

Havilot, choking, clenched his rage into his fists, but could not keep it out of his voice. It shook there.

'It is witness of infamy here or there, Pikpoyntz! Infamy black as night all about us! By Christ my Saviour, I will bottom it though I cut my way with a sword.'

'Peace, brother, peace,' said Grand-Fé, very white. 'We will confer together, if you please.'

'The way is open, my lords,' said Pikpoyntz. 'Beausobre, the door.'

So the conference for that day went out in storm. But for Pikpoyntz at least a ray of light showed the hope of new day. When he went to pay his respects to the Countess of Gru, he found Mabilla with her. He bent again before the young girl.

'Well, my nephew, what speed with their lordships?' said the Countess.

'Too much on their part, yet too little for me,' he replied.

Mabilla rose and looked at him.

'Did you convince my uncle that there had been war, my lord ?'

'Lady, it is not war that smarts in his blood, but defeat. He is not so proud as you.'

'They call her The Proud Lady in her country,' said the Countess, blinking and shaking.

'They do well, my lady,' said the Earl. The maid of the steady eyes stood between.

'Neither defeat nor war is shameful, as I read,' said she. Pikpoyntz glowed colour of a flame. Like a fire his hope surged.

'You take my word, madam ! By Heaven, do you take it ?'

She had one hand at her necklace, fingering the emeralds. She looked as delicate as a piece of Sèvres biscuit, with her colour of tender rose ; but Pikpoyntz knew better. He thought he had never seen water so deep and still as her thoughtful eyes. Then her breath quickened till her resting hand was like weed, swayed by a brimming tide ; the hand loosed hold of the toy and fell lower ; she was thinking, wondering, daring. The hand fell lower and stayed ; it pressed her heart. She was very young.

'Take my word, madam, take it, take it,' stammered the glaring Earl. 'Take it, and I care for nothing in the world.'

The girl still wondered, her lips began to move. The Countess watched her like a cat.

'I should be ashamed to be your guest, and to doubt you, my lord,' said Mabilla.

Her women came to take her to bed. The

Countess kissed her twice, Pikpoyntz knelt down. She went without any more words.

‘By the God that shall judge me, I have found a woman at last,’ said the Earl aloud.

‘You have found what you are not fit to look upon, as you know quite well,’ said his aunt. ‘That child is priceless. The God that shall judge you should have no mercy upon you if you misuse that gift. Now go and pray.’

But the Earl stayed on, roaring his ecstasies half the night.

CHAPTER XIII

A FORTIORI

BUBO the hunchback, having served the turns of Blanchmains, Firmin, and his master, was hanged at nine o'clock in the morning by the last, as soon as there had been time to think of him. This was Pikpoyntz justice. ‘I am not Bull of the North for nothing,’ would have been the Earl’s comment. The fellow had done him by no means a bad turn as things had fallen out, but he had deceived his lord and must pay. He paid directly after morning chapel.

Walking up the Long Walk alone after this ceremony, the Earl saw coming towards him a little figure that made his heart jump. Again he swore to himself, as he had sworn every day he had spent with her, ‘By God, what a maid for me !’ A mist blew over his eyes so that he could hardly see her after the first shock. No woman—and he had seen enough—had troubled him so before ; yet she always did. I think that she, in the depths of her bold little breast, was troubled no less. She was very grave and very pale—pale to the lips, which, as usual, were dry.

He took her hand and kissed it. If he had ever worn headgear it would have been off by now.

'My lord,' said Mabilla, looking him full in the face, 'I have certain questions to put to you, and have chosen the first moment open to me. I wish to speak of my cousin Renny. Will you hear what I have to say?' He bowed his head.

'You have the fullest right to ask, lady, and my first duty is to declare to you. Speak therefore.'

'You do not know where my cousin is?'

'I would give all I have to know it, madam.'

'Why so, my lord?'

'That I might take her to Coldscaur.'

'Is that your whole desire concerning her, my lord?'

'It is now my whole desire. The country is at peace, the castle in good order; all is ready.'

'Is that where you have sent Blanchmains, my lord?'

The Earl started. What was this? He had nothing to do, however, but answer.

'I have sent her to Coldscaur; yes.'

'My cousin did not love her.' Pikpoyntz now made up his mind.

'She had reason to love her, if she had but known what I suppose she did not know.'

'Who is Blanchmains?'

'She is the daughter of your uncle the Prince-Bishop, my lady.'

Mabilla coloured deeply and bit her lip. She

did not venture any further in that direction. Pikpoyntz did.

'She is a lady of great discretion. I can trust her thoroughly. She has with her my lieutenant, Frélus, and a stout garrison. They could hold the Scaur against a host.'

'And now Marvilion awaits its lady?' the girl repeated while she was trying to regain herself.

'It awaits Renny. As such she must go in, for such she is. She shall never fail of all honour I can pay her. She is my ward. I had hoped to make a closer tie between us—but I think I may thank God I was put out.'

'You had intended, my lord——?'

'I had intended marriage, my lady. I had intended to make a permanent peace between my country and hers. There has never yet been peace there. I had the chance.' Mabilla was greatly affected by this news. She opened her eyes wide, was excited. The Earl of Pikpoyntz, considered abstractly, was a mushroom beside a Renny; but this Earl, this hard yet honest enemy, this huge fighter gravely seeking peace, was respectable. Marvilion and Pikpoyntz—what a royal appanage! Renny had chosen Firmin! It was like a Renny, and therefore admirable: yet Mabilla sighed, as she considered the Renny crown.

'My cousin chose her own husband, it seems, my lord,' she said. 'As we say, *Renie pas Reini*.'

'But you, my lady, yourself, you say, *Plustost Reini qe Reina*,' said the Earl in a deep voice. To this she answered nothing. Looking with

half-shut eyes at the ardent creature before him, he wondered how he could keep his arms from her. Who, O Heaven, would be queen if she could be so rare as this? Flesh she was, and therein lay her charm for him; yet flesh made subtle by poignant pride of soul, and therein lay the awe that held him.

It held him shaking in every limb before her. She spoke first.

'My lord,' she said, 'you have spoken me very fair. I am glad now that I told you of my trust. I wish my cousin could have known of this. She might have thought longer what she was about. One thing only I must ask you. If she can be found, if she return to her lands, what will be her husband's position towards you?'

'Oh, proud little lady, what have I to do to you now?' thought he. And then, 'Dare I do it?' And then, 'My prize! Is it not worth everything, by our Lord?'

'He is not her husband, my lady,' he said quietly. Mabilla had not dreamed of this; it took her off her guard, sent the blood ebbing from her face and then brought it back in a vivid flow. Once more he had made her hand fly to her side.

'Your news is terrible. Do my uncles know of this?'

'It is terrible. I told them a week ago. And I have punished those who brought it upon us.'

'You have done well, sir.' She had recovered herself. The flash of the new fact had lit up the girl's path for her. She saw how near it brought

her to her throne. The Renny crown was in sight : and then recurred her earlier thought—Marvilion and Pikpoyntz ! and she looked to go.

Pikpoyntz saw her waver, but like a wise man determined to take no profit out of that. He would wait his time, let his weight tell, get others to work for him when the hour for working came.

‘Your kinsmen refuse me, but you do not refuse me, my lady,’ he said soberly. ‘We are allies in this, that we both seek one person, and for her one thing. Is it not so ?’

‘I think it is,’ said Mabilla. And then she looked up at him and held out her hand. He took it and held it as long as he dared, but did not resist her withdrawal. Down upon his knees he dropped, and kissed the thing entrusted before he let go.

When she had gone he lifted up his arms towards the sky. ‘God send me to Hell if I do more villainy !’ he groaned, as though he knew how that must be answered. For, indeed, the poor wretch was up to his neck in villainy.

Yet what remained to be done he did deliberately, as one that goes through a part by rote. He strode back to his castle, into his Council Chamber, and sent a civil message, begging the attendance of their lordships the Bishops. Their lordships kept him on the fret for half-an-hour : then came—first the implacable Havilot, then Grand-Fé poking his head like a stork, then young Bernart of Joyeulx Saber.

‘My lords,’ said the Earl, ‘I am entitled to

know what has settled down in your lordships' minds since our last conference. Your lordships have had a week to consider it. During that time I have sought my ward diligently ; but unhappily I still seek her.'

Havilot stood up with a wagging finger. 'Earl of Pikpoyntz,' he said, 'we would have you know that the House of Renny is neither friendless nor empty of resource of its own. It hath never yet failed to bite the biter, if not with law upon its side, then without law. In the present case, my lord, the House of Renny hath justice and the Justiciar. It hath the King's writ and the King's self. The alliance that is preparing—which is of old preparation—needs only to be named to show you how we stand. The heiress-apparent of Coldscaur—my niece Donna Mabilla—will wed the heir-apparent of the throne. If the King do not justice to his own blood, then there is no justice. Do you follow me, my lord ?'

Pikpoyntz followed only too well. He ground his teeth together, but said nothing. Havilot went on : he was no diplomatist.

'By your act—since I cannot speak plainer with my host—by your act Renny of Coldscaur became a child, a young maid. By your act she came hither ; by your act she hath cast herself away. You tell us that you claim Wardship and Marriage. Wardship you have lost. Marriage remains. We are willing to give you that—on terms.'

'Brother, brother,' cried Grand-Fé in a desperate stew, 'I beg of you to let me speak. The affair is most delicate.'

Pikpoyntz, who saw how delicate it was going to be, gave a gross laugh.

'You are in a devil of a hurry to get me a boy, my good Bishop,' said the giant, grinning. 'You might at least let me choose a clean bed.'

'My lord, ah, my good lord,' the Prince-Bishop interposed, highly nervous, 'she is still Renny of Coldscaur.'

'She is still a man's mistress, my lord Prince,' the Earl rejoined, keeping a steady eye upon him, 'and she may stop so for me.'

There was really no comment whatever to be made upon this, though Bishop Stephen saw his scheme shrivel coil by coil. Pikpoyntz would (as it were) have rolled over on his tongue his adversary's undoing, if he had not been too much in earnest on his own account.

'My lords,' he said, 'I will tell you what I am prepared to do—on terms. It will be for you to decide whether you are prepared to agree to it—on terms. Let her keep the Renny fief under my wardship until she is of age. Let Marvilion be laid to Pikpoyntz, and the border quiet. If by the time she is of age I can marry her to some fool—well, I will do it and lose the sum of my sword's buying. If I cannot find a fool who is fool enough, she will hold it for life. This I will do—upon terms.'

'What are these terms of yours, my lord?' cried Havilot, at his wits' end.

'I will tell you that when I know myself, my dear lord Bishop,' said the Earl. Then the conference broke up.

If Havilot knew not his will, Mabilla knew. Our young lady was no novice in affairs of the hearts of men. She had read the heart of Pikpoyntz like an open book in the morning's interview ; but she had read it as plainly in every hot look, every shift of his ungainly body, every blink of his troubled eyes or mutter of his hoarse voice. She knew that she would have to reckon with it, therefore (being the girl she was) she set to work to read her own. Marvilion and Pikpoyntz !—a goodly fief ; a wedge, she thought, driven down to the very navel of the realm ; a broad core of lordship, the realm's marrow it might be. With that, a man. Against it, Barsaunter—sad stretch of sand and bleached grey grass ; and, cut off from it, Marvilion. With those, Don John ! From the height at which her birth placed her, all men could be judged upon their merits. Well ! what had she to say here ? She declared to herself that she cared nothing for the merits of men ; she had never held speech with Love when he came knocking at her heart's door, and thought that she might leave him out of account. She loved neither of these men ; she loved no one. But the Renny Crown—that great dome of gold which Sabine had put aside ! Ah, she must have that ! It came to her by right ; no need of a Pikpoyntz or Prince John to reach it for her ; but if she had it she must marry, and of the two fates, to be Countess of Pikpoyntz seemed the more tolerable.

She knew nothing of love—of that she was very sure—and regarded marriage as an alliance of two sovereigns of states. She knew that it

would touch her more nearly than that—her mind was no unwritten book ; she knew she would have to reckon with a man ; there would be commerce not to be delegated to a steward. Deliberately she put this out of her head. Such considerations, she thought, were unhealthy. When the time came to act, she would act. She was fully of her friend's mind—the Countess of Gru's : her husband must be a counter in her game, and not she in his.

So, then, she took deliberate survey of the red Earl. What had he ? Experience ! Ah, there was a thing she could value ! No doubt of his experience ; the man was seamed with it. Mabilla, the young girl, delicately stepping into the world, not so much intending to take possession of it as aware that such was her prerogative —Mabilla found this seamed Earl admirable for his scars. He was seamed till he was nearly hideous—a red bullet-head cropt close, small reddish eyes which showed her unguessed twinkling deeps of reminiscence, a great square jaw hedged with a spiky beard (fearful defences of that grim oracle, his tongue), a neck like a bull's, and shoulders which might lift a church porch and not crack. He was six foot three to her poor five. Look at his knotty, hairy hands. What iron threads of what lordship might they not hold ? He never bore shield or helm in warfare, never covered up his hands ; he had beaten the Rennys, pierced the inviolate Scaur ; he was Bull of the North ; and now he sought to break another Renny ! She was riding as she thought

of these things ; her colour rose high with the gallop, or the indignity of this last flash. She set her little teeth, tightened her lips, and let the sharp breath whistle through her nose. Would he tame her ? The thought that he might try gave her heart ; the conviction that he would try gave her a throb of curiosity.

Coming back from her gallop she was handed a letter from Lanceilhot which, in answer to her Canhoe postscript, dealt with marriage. ‘ In a holier state than this of ours,’ he wrote, ‘ there was perhaps no marriage ; for love stood for all. But then to Love came Marriage grinning and said, “ Give me the ordering of thy house. Thou shalt have ease to suck thy sweets ; let me drudge for thee.” Ah, fool ! He hath done it, and now there is no love, for marriage stands for all. My blessed lady, marry thy lean Prince if thou wilt. Thy lovely body will be his, which it will be no more sin in him to take than if a man should spit in the mass-cup before Mass. The grossness can but enhance the glory of the hidden God. Thy soul, lady, thy holy soul like an altar flame burneth upon my heart ! None can rob me of it — I have called it mine — I hold it fast. Night and day I trim and dress it. Give the Prince thy body ; I have thy soul.’

‘ Have I then no soul ? ’ she thought half whimsically over this wild letter. ‘ What a boy, to share with Don John the possession of me ! ’ She thought of his serious pale face, his impossible hot grey eyes, his authority when poetry was in debate, his abject servility when she raised an

eyebrow. What a stupid, brave, clever, good boy ! She felt tenderly, and put his letter in her bosom by habit. Half-an-hour's talk with the old Countess of Gru made her forget its writer and its nest.

' My dear,' said the old lady, breaking in upon her gossip of courts and wild doings under the old Flahault kings, ' my dear, I have been pestered by my huge nephew. He has been here, stamping and raving like a hungry beast. It seems that their Reverences have managed to insult him.'

' Is that so hard ? ' asked Mabilla.

' How do you mean, child ? That insult is a light matter to a Renny bishop ? '

' Not so, Countess. I wondered whether it was difficult to find words which would insult the Earl of Pikpoyntz. You seem to imply it.'

' You are a little wretch, and he will be lucky if you make him as miserable as he deserves,' said the Countess in great good humour. ' We have left the road, nevertheless, and must return. Their Reverences, your uncles, it seems, proposed to the Earl of Pikpoyntz that he should find their niece, throttle her paramour, and then marry her himself. They considered this the proper way out of the tangle. What do you say to that, child ? '

' *Renie pas Reini*, my lady, is what I am bound to reply.'

' That, I take it, is what Madam de Renny herself said. She did not wait to be denied. Their Reverences, however, do wait.'

' Have they not been denied, Countess ? '

' They no longer proffer the boon, my dear. But Pikpoyntz was about to propose them another.'

He has not done so, at my instance. I said, "My fine fellow, your formalities are proper for everything but the end you have in view. If you wish to fail, you will do as you propose. The Bishops will debate your offer. It is politically so good that they will order its acceptance. And that is exactly what they will not get. Is it possible, nephew," I rounded on him, "is it possible that you know so little of the lady you adore as to suppose she will capitulate because a couple of bishops command it?" He gaped at me; I called him a fool. I think now that he agrees with me. What do you say to all this?"

Mabilla gave her little tapping foot a look askance.

'I think, Countess, that a lady who could refuse the commands of two bishops might dare to brave the beseeching of one earl.'

'Doubtless, my dear,' said the Countess of Gru. 'I understand that she has not deigned an answer to that of a Prince.'

'Oh, Countess,' cried Mabilla, 'you are very wise! I wonder how much of you I understand?' And she kissed the old lady.

'More than is good for you, my dear,' said the other. 'I am very fond of you, but I'm a wicked old soul for all that.'

Mabilla withdrew. Going to bed that night, the Viscount her brother took her aside. In the shadow of the room stood the tall Holdis, blushing and looking down.

'My sister,' says the Viscount, 'you may account me the happiest of men.'

‘Why so, Bernart?’ says she.

‘For this lovely reason, my dear,’ he answered her. Then he took up Hold’s hand, kissed and held it.

‘So, so, my lord!’ said Mabilla gaily. Then to Hold, ‘Cousin, are you willing to be my sister?’

‘Please, Mabilla, yes,’ said the pretty girl.

Mabilla put both hands on her waist and turned her to the light. The tall girl laughed and blushed more deeply. Mabilla read her.

‘You will be glorious at Joyeux Saber, my Hold. The Monk of Mauleon will make *coblas* all day; every balcony will hide its lutanist. When you ride out on your white palfrey you will be escorted by a hundred knights in your colours; no other subject but you will hold the Courts of Love. Saill de la Garde will mope in her tower; Tibors de la Roche-Percée will be kind to her husband; Bernart must either turn poet or take to politics. I recommend the latter, for unless he is the best poet in Campflors he will have no chance with you.’

‘Oh, cousin Mabilla, how you tease! I love Bernart only,’ cried Donna Hold quickly.

‘Oh, cousin Hold, you are a goose; but I will love you as well as Bernart!’ laughed the other.

The golden Renny stooped and kissed the cheek of the pale Renny, the ‘white rose of Campflors,’ as the poets called her.

‘There is some happiness left us yet in the midst of all this perplexity,’ said Mabilla to her brother afterwards. ‘Pray, brother, have you

settled on any plans in these conferences of yours?’

‘The great thief,’ replied Bernart, ‘holds to his booty. Your Uncle Stephen proposed a way out, but he would have none of it.’

‘Was it indeed a way out, my dear Bernart? Or only a way in deeper?’ The Viscount looked quickly at his sister. He was, however, too happy to be intelligent. As always happens to young men in this pass, he turned moralist.

‘My dear,’ he said, ‘I need nothing to complete my happiness but the knowledge of your certain establishment. You know the terrible truth concerning your cousin Renny? There is only her life between you and Marvilion. Great feudatories should be broad rooted. You must marry.’

‘But I am not a great feudatory, Bernart.’

‘But you will be.’

‘I have no objection to broad roots, but I choose that they shall be of my planting.’

‘You are the betrothed of Don John, my sister.’

‘Pardon, Bernart. Don John is betrothed, if at all, to the Bishop of Havilot or to the lady who carried me to church.’

‘What is this, sister?’

‘It is what appears to me the fact, brother.’

‘But the alliance has been agreed to.’

‘Then the allies must carry it out. I decline to help them.’

‘You are mad, Mabilla!’

‘I am not so sure as I once was that I am, my dear Bernart.’

'You must speak with your uncle, Mabilla.'

'I think it is near time for him to speak with me,' said she.

Thus, one by one, the allies (conscious or unconscious) of the Earl of Pikpoyntz bore down upon this girl. The strong man had mass of his own, had made her respect him in a house where every other soul either feared or abhorred him. This was very much. The cleverness of the Countess of Gru consisted in this, that she appeared to expect his rejection by Mabilla ; the very helpful stupidity of Viscount Bernart lay in his confidence that she would carry out her betrothal. Then came Lanceilhot's letter with sophistries to beguile her. She valued that young man's opinion more than she would have cared to confess. His love was a thing to be scorned at leisure, but to be counted on in a pinch. Without knowing it, she used it as a stay. Were trouble in the wind, she would have gone to him first. So now she read over his letter again before she went to bed, and sat with it in her hands a long time, twisting it, thinking of it. That was love ! Good heavens, the strange matter ! And Pikpoyntz loved her—eh, but not like that ! Without formulas she could guess how Pikpoyntz loved her. It was that night she wrote her friend her shortest letter—'Master Lanceilhot, I am too much concerned to be more than your faithful, M.' Very characteristically, the more tenderly she felt the less she wrote down.

So tenderly did she feel at this hour that while

she was thinking her hand which held his letter strayed to her lips. The letter rested there before it returned to share her bosom with the silver Christ. Yet in her letter, instead of ‘Good Lanceilhot,’ she was careful to put ‘Master Lanceilhot,’ and very gently, very thankfully she lingered on the letters of his name. It seems she had the dog’s instinct to bury a treasure. So at least she buried the grain of kindness.

She went to sleep that night with a sense of destiny which in itself was the strongest hand raised against her that day.

CHAPTER XIV

PIKPOYNTZ'S WAY

AN armed truce best describes the next few weeks. The Bishops held no colloquy with Pikpoyntz ; Pikpoyntz made them no proposals. To Mabilla he was gravely respectful, but by no means thrust himself upon her. He spent great thought and large sums devising entertainments—nominally for his guests at large, actually for the youngest of them. Mabilla knew all about that. The best falcon was for her flying, the dropped heron always hers. She opened the dance, she crowned the victors in the games ; she was Queen of Beauty at the great Beauchef tournament, where all the knights of Pikpoyntz and Logres shivered lances. The Earl himself, whom no one could have withstood, held off from this jousting. Mabilla admired him for it ; the soured Bishop of Havilot looked his contempt ; Viscount Bernart bore himself very well.

In all these affairs Pikpoyntz kept an astonishing hold upon himself. Ordinarily as heady as the bull his namesake, he might have been surprised at himself. But he knew what he was

playing for ; much more than a shire. He was strong enough to hold that and hardy enough to brave King, Prince, and a bench of bishops for such a prize. But now he wanted Mabilla. For her he was now ready to give up the Renny fief ; and so much every look, every stiff phrase, every shuffle of his huge body told her.

She began to wonder when he would move in this game of which she was the prize. It was a most interesting game, she thought, still keeping her impersonal view of the whole affair. What strength the giant had ! She could see him sweat sometimes as he checked himself from answering some bitter speech of Havilot's or some impertinence of Joyeux Saber's. But he did check himself ; he seemed to her like some scarred rock in the sea subject to the ceaseless fretting of little waves. Ah, it needed a night of storm to shake him !

The truth was this. After the last meeting of the enemies Bishop Stephen had sent an urgent letter to his ally, Don John, telling him the state of affairs. Madam Sabine, he wrote, had spoilt all their plans ; Pikpoyntz would not marry her, therefore could not be outlawed and hanged immediately afterwards. What was to be done ? The Bishop added his suspicion (it was that of his brother, in fact) that the Earl had another marriage in his mind's eye. This letter, by a very simple device, was read by the Earl of Pikpoyntz long before it reached Don John.

When he was master of it he called another conference and made his proposals in form.

‘I beg your lordships to hear me to the end,’ he said gravely. ‘So long as the Lady Renny of Coldscaur is alive and unmarried I claim the marriage of her. Until she is of age I consider her my ward and hold her lands. If I get her married I take good care to secure the fruit of my fortunate warfare ; if she dies unmarried, I beg leave to say that I shall know how to safeguard myself against the next taker. But I put before you the following considerations :—

‘First—Marvilion is at peace and should remain so.

‘Second—It is at peace because I hold it, and for so long as I hold it.

‘Third—That, large and fair a possession as it is, the addition of another earldom would make it larger and fairer.

‘Fourth—That the next male Renny must needs be of my provision, for if he spring from Donna Sabine I shall choose his father for him.

‘Whether you agree to these propositions or not, I make them deliberately, after many weeks’ reflection. Upon them I base the following proposal, which I make with equal deliberation : The next male Renny shall be of my provision. He shall be Renny of Coldscaur, Lord of Marvilion and Earl of Pikpoyntz, for (if you agree, my lords) I will get him from the body of my wife, Donna Mabilla de Renny.’

Bernart sprang to his feet and set hand to sword. ‘Never, while I live, by the rood of St. Pol !’ he swore. Pikpoyntz sat back in his big

chair with folded arms and looked at him. By that time Havilot was ready for him.

'You have murdered my kinsfolk, betrayed my chief, thieved my patrimony, trailed my good name in the kennel, Pikpoyntz,' he began. Then, with a sudden access of rage, 'You dog, I will get you hanged before I have done with you!'

Pikpoyntz laughed at him. 'You will need a more present ally than your lurking John of Barsaunter for that work, Havilot,' he said lightly. 'I am a big dog for a cord of your pulling. What says his Grace of Grand-Fé, my neighbour?' and he turned to the grey-faced Prince Bishop. His Grace of Grand-Fé was not fond of cut and thrust; he worked by night. Having cleared his throat, 'I doubt not,' said he, 'we shall yet find a way to accord our differences. But it can hardly be the way your lordship proposes. A great alliance has been struck between my Lord Don John and our niece. It is of old standing. Recent events may tend to complete it. My judgment is that the Prince should be a party to any future conferences we have, since he is in a manner nearly touched by them. So much your lordship will admit.'

Pikpoyntz laughed again. 'My dear lord,' he said, with a shrug, 'all that I am prepared to admit is that the heir of Renny is to be of my provision. I do not need the help of the King's brother in the affair.' Then he yawned and stretched his long arms. It had the effect he intended—Havilot strode toward him and shook

a fist in his face. ‘I shall get the help of the King’s brother in my affair, you cattle reiver !’

‘Earl of Pikpoyntz, I will take upon me this quarrel !’ cried Bernart in a fume. ‘You avoided me at the tourney. Let me see if I can force you to terms.’ He stepped lightly to him, with a gauntlet swinging ; he cuffed the Earl on the face with it. Pikpoyntz with a howl leaped to his feet ; he was red as fire. How he held himself I cannot guess, for his blood was boiling. But he pulled up within a foot of his man and stood glaring at him. Then he lifted up his big hand, pointed to the door, and to Bernart said shortly, ‘Out, cockerel, out !’ Grand-Fé got the pair of them out at last.

At supper that night strife broke out again, deliberately provoked by Joyeux Saber. The young man was in a high mood, being for the first time in his life at cross-counter with his sister. The fact was that as soon as the morning conference was over he had sought her out, driven by that necessity a young man has, after a deed done, to find countenance for it. ‘Oh, Mabilla,’ cries he, ‘the game here is over ! The cattle thief has played his great card and been flouted for his pains. We may cry boot and saddle.’ ‘How so ?’ asks Mabilla, and then he told her. Her answer to his heroics had frozen him. It was that if her uncles took to peddling they must not ask her to learn the trade, and then she said : ‘Have you ever seen the drovers try to get pigs over the bridge at Saint Save ? There is but one way ; the man must pretend he wishes to return

to the market-place. My Uncle Stephen will never drive a pig.' It took two hours with Hold in the orchard to thaw the Viscount. The sight of Mabilla's quizzing brow at supper time fetched him up as stiff as a rod again.

Then came the broil. The Prince-Bishop, by way of healing sores, conversed with his host. The talk was of long-bow practice, of which the Earl spoke out of the stores of his experience. He was never a boaster, but gave his facts deliberately. Perhaps they sounded vain-glorious because they sounded far. Bernart listened, fretting for a chance.

'A flying pigeon at fifty yards would be fine work, my lord,' said Grand-Fé.

'H'm ! I have done it often,' said the Earl.

The Viscount leaned across Hold to speak, and spoke with the shrill, clear voice of bumptious youth.

'I have hit a pigeon flying at sixty yards, my Lord of Grand-Fé. True, it was in a cleaner air than this drench.' Pikpoyntz gave a short laugh ; his own mood was none too equable.

'Rare air and rare tales come out of the West,' says he to the company at large. The Countess of Gru began to blink, Mabilla to make bread pills. Afterward she drew the Renny crown with her nail on the polished board.

The Viscount had a high colour as well as a high head. He now lifted both.

'Does the Earl of Pikpoyntz question either ?' he asked in the air.

'Pest !' said the Earl. 'I question nothing. I affirm.'

‘ You should be a judge of the truth, my lord,’ said the Viscount.

‘ I am,’ said the Earl.

The sledgehammer method of the elder man was damaging. The Prince-Bishop cut in.

‘ My dear Viscount, I can assure you of this at least, that you are talking to a Bowman. I have seen my Lord of Pikpoyntz at the work—ah, pardieu, and I have seen his bow! Did you ever hear of the bow of Ulysses?’

‘ Never ! ’ said Havilot with emphasis ; but the Viscount tried a colder manner. ‘ Are we to have tales so rare as that out of Pikpoyntz, my Prince ? ’ he asked. ‘ The air of Campflors cannot support the deeds of poets.’

‘ Come not to Speir for poetry, my lord,’ said the Earl ; ‘ but if you have need of bows I may supply you.’

‘ We may bring bows and bowmen at our second coming, my lord,’ cried Havilot, flushed. The Earl ignored him. ‘ I have no poetry here, my lords,’ he repeated. ‘ A bow I have, and on occasion a certain knack with it. It is a pretty toy, your long-bow—or so I thought when I was of the age of the Lord Viscount Bernart.’

‘ It is a toy that can sting, my lord,’ shrilled Bernart.

‘ I have the best reasons in life for believing you, my young lord.’

‘ And these, sir ? ’

‘ Eh ! I have done some stinging with them in my time.’

‘ More tales, my lord, of Ulysses ? ’

'I know not this Ulysses,' said the Earl shortly, 'but this I know, that I do my stinging with a bow, not a tale.' Mabilla smiled. The Viscount jumped up.

'With which do you sting me, my lord?' He was both hot and angry.

Pikpoyntz looked at the ceiling. 'Shrike, come here,' he said. The black came creeping up. 'Fetch me my long-bow and a couple of shafts.'

He was waited upon in a general silence. Taking the huge black bow in his hands he bent it easily and pushed the cord home with his foot. As he notched his arrow he looked up to the lantern of the roof, saying, 'I will show you how I can sting.'

Then he pulled the bow—not hard. The arrow shot up into the roof, seemed to slow as it gained the lantern, hung there a moment, turned and dropped downward to the table. Though the disputants were separated by some five paces, the shaft fell directly in front of Joyeux Saber; it skewered a boar's head set there exactly in the middle of the skull and buried itself so far as the lump of flesh allowed.

'Finely shot, by the death of God!' Havilot could not restrain himself.

'Pretty work, pretty work!' — this from Grand-Fé.

'Take the bow to my Lord of Joyeux Saber,' said the Earl to Shrike, and Mabilla's lips parted as she watched.

The Viscount overdid the strength; the arrow stuck in the woodwork of the lantern and was no

more seen. ‘It will find some company up there among the cobwebs,’ said the Earl, yawning. Bernart worried the matter to death. Mabilla thought him absurd, and even Havilot and the adoring Hold grew weary. ‘My lord, it cannot end here,’ said the young man. ‘I wish it could, then,’ the Earl interjected. ‘I want my supper.’

‘You have challenged my sayings, my lord?’

‘Stuff!’ said the Earl.

‘I now challenge yours! ’

‘As you will and when you will,’ said the Earl, ‘so long as we may sup first.’

‘Lists, then, my lord,’ cried the youth, ‘lists and a jury—and to-morrow! ’

‘I will see to it,’ said Pikpoyntz. ‘Shrike, have everything ready! ’

Pikpoyntz got two words with Mabilla before bedtime.

‘This folly of to-morrow has been none of my choosing, madam.’

‘Folly, my lord? It will be great entertainment.’

‘I know not that, lady. There is bad blood at the root of it.’

‘Can it not be let, my lord?’

‘Not by me.’

‘Then it must be a white tournament.’

Pikpoyntz looked at her hard. ‘Will you give the prize, my lady?’ he growled.

‘What is the prize?’

‘It shall be what you please. I will give you entertainment on those terms. Will you do it, madam?’

'I will consider,' said she, looking wise. 'Good night, my lord.' He watched her go. At the top of the stair she glanced down as she turned and saw him watching her still from under his heavy brows.

Betimes next morning the adventure was on foot. It began with a deliberation on both sides out of all measure to the nature of it. The Bishop of Havilot held a colloquy with his champion, the result of which was a visit paid by the Viscount to his men's quarters. The Earl of Pikpoyntz was not seen of any man until the trumpet of onset claimed him, but he too had been with his secretary and lieutenants. When the time came for opening the lists the two bishops, with their nieces, rode down the long walk to the pavilion set at the target end (where the King and guests should sit); but they rode, for the first time at Speir, at the head of an armed troop. Pikpoyntz from his window in the tower watched them go. He saw Donna Mabilla in green cloth with a gauze scarf fluttering about her head; he saw Donna Hold in silver and blue; then he looked at the horsemen, steel clad, armed with lances and swords, and counted them with his eye. 'Two hundred spears, Beausobre,' he said. The man went out, and the Earl followed almost on his heels.

The competitors faced their work—Joyeux Saber, clothed in fine leather delicately worked and tooled, looked too light for it. He had scented gauntlets, a cap jewelled and feathered. The Earl was, as always, in his stained buff jerkin

and great boots ; as always, he was bare-headed and bare-handed ; he looked the butcher, as always. The long lists were lined with a sprinkling of the household ; the pavilion held the guests on horseback ; the jury sat on a bench before it, and the Prince-Bishop was arbiter. The Renny cavalry acted as guard of honour. There were no soldiery of Pikpoyntz to be seen —not a single pike.

When the Prince-Bishop raised his hand a trumpet sounded. The Earl stalked out into the lists, his bow in his hand.

They were to try for distance first. The lists, exactly measured, were 410 yards from mark to parapet. The parapet gave on to the sheer drop of the rock down into the valley ; a broad white sheet was held across by two pole bearers ; fifty pairs of eyes were ready to see the shafts wing into the valley. Pikpoyntz drew his arrow to the barb and let fly. True enough it flew, a low and steady course ; it lopped the cloth and was marked into the Sâr. A flag was run up ; now it was the Viscount's turn.

The Viscount used a lighter bow, a longer and lighter shaft, true cloth-yard length. Had there been much wind this might have told against him, but there was very little. Pikpoyntz, chewing his red beard, watched him furtively, with a keenness he could not conceal. He would have scoffed at such an idle game as this if he had not known that the stakes were high. Not for many moments at a time was his eye off the far pavilion. A slim chestnut horse bearing a slim

burden ; the flutter of a pale scarf—he had good eyes and could have sworn to the curve of a cheek. The flag answered Bernart as it had answered him.

Shot for shot, three times apiece the flag went up. Then came the mark firing, and first the target. At two hundred yards Pikpoyntz was beaten by one point. He heard the distant clapping of hands from the pavilion and got hot, wondering whether a little kissed pair were at that work. It was an odd thing, worthy of remark, that when the young Viscount made a point there was a hum of relief down the line, that when the Earl lost a point there was a sort of shiver (as of wonder how much loss he would bear), and that when he gained face looked into face, but there was no sound. Pikpoyntz himself understood and gloried in it—he had rather be feared than loved ; he ruled that way. But would Mabilla read it as 'he did ? Would she find this dreadful loneliness of his admirable ? Come what might, he must win this match.

The next mark was the tied pigeon ; the distance one hundred and fifty yards. Bernart killed his first bird by a clean shot through the crop ; Pikpoyntz his, through both eyes. Bernart missed his next ; Pikpoyntz by luck cut the string of his. That put him ahead ; the bird went free. Quick as lightning he shot again, out of his turn, and brought her down at some two hundred and fifty paces—an astounding shot. 'Foul, foul, foul !' shouted Bernart, and galloped up the lists. He claimed the shot ; the jury gave a verdict for their Earl, but the arbiter overruled them—it

must be the Viscount's. This brought him two points ahead of his adversary, since a foul counted three against you. Pikpoyntz's last chance was the wand splitting at ninety yards. Those who knew their man prepared for ugly weather. His neck was beginning to swell.

The Earl grazed his first wand and succeeded in knocking it askew. This counted one for him. Bernart missed. The Earl split it clean ; another being set up, Bernart drew and split it.

'Viscount,' said Pikpoyntz, mumbling his words, 'follow this if you can.' The Viscount silently watched the shot, and felt that it would be hard to beat.

It was one of those hanging shots of his, drawn with force exquisite enough to split the wand, but no more. The shaft actually hung suspended in the cleft stick ; it was quivering still from the jar of impact when Bernart notched his arrow and drew the bow amid absolute quiet ; the line of watchers seemed not to breathe as he aimed. Pikpoyntz, blinking furiously, kept outwardly cool, though inwardly he surged. At the far end the little green rider had moved in advance of her companions and was standing in the stirrup. He saw her blue scarf flapping above all the others.

The Viscount drew and shot. His arrow split the Earl's where it hung—split it as clean as with a knife—and slipped on some twenty spaces. It was an admirable show of nerve—the 'Ah!' that sighed down the field could not have been repressed.

'Death of God!' swore the Earl, and fitted

an arrow. Before his triumphant adversary could so much as hold up his hand he had drawn his bow to cracking point and the bolt had sped, singing.

A queer commotion in the crowd, a shiver voiced and perfectly audible, made Bernart look about him. He saw great business in the pavilion, horses rearing, men running, then some shouting —something was wrong. He ran with all his might down the lists, and then he saw what the Bull of the North had done. He had shot into the pavilion and pinned Donna Mabilla to one of the posts by her silk scarf. Not a hair of her head had been broken; her horse had not swerved an inch, but the arrow was buried to the feathers, with full half of it beyond the post.

The Viscount drove in among the surging crowd like another arrow. He was not long cutting down his sister, even though his rage and scorn set his hand shaking like a girl's. He fumbled with his knife and hacked so savagely at the scarf that Mabilla laughed at him. 'You do me more hurt than the Red Earl, Bernart,' she said. She was rather breathless, rather pale, but perfectly gay and not in the least frightened. She heard her raving Uncle Havilot; she twinkled with merriment to see his purple face and witless hands. Meantime the Viscount had strode out into the middle of the lists.

'Stand aside, you there!' he shouted with all his might. 'Clear the lists, clear, clear!' men cried to each other. Then he was able to look down toward the Earl. Clear enough he stood

outlined on the pale parched grass ; he had not moved, but stood leaning on his bow, watching his enemy. Bernart aimed dead at him ; Pikpoyntz never budged. The man was entirely fearless—even Bernart owned that ; but Mabilla, wild with interest, could have sung it loud. ‘This is a man ! This is a man indeed !’ she told herself, and the thought set her heart a-beating. Not a soul made to cover his lord—she saw that and admired the man the more who could be so dreadful at death’s gate. Bernart could have killed him like a boar if he had had the mind. But he had no intent to murder. The Earl was bareheaded, but at the other end was booted like a dragoon. Bernart had noticed those great boots of his ; he shot now at his man’s foot and pinned him to the turf by the toe of his boot.

The moment he was struck the Earl glared round him—too late to stop a snigger here and there at the neatness of the vengeance and the stroke. One unfortunate he caught in the act of strangling a grin. ‘Come here, you,’ he called with a raven’s croak ; ‘loose my boot.’ The white wretch had to go, knowing it was his death warrant. He knelt before his lord and did his work. As he crept upright the Earl brought down his fist on the top of his head and dropped him like a stone. ‘Take that away,’ he said to a bystander, and that was all.

Then the Viscount came up. ‘Had I known with what a blackguard I was striving I would have set one of my lackeys to shoot, Earl of Pikpoyntz.’ The young man was not master

of himself. Pikpoyntz, however, was perfectly cool.

'You shoot admirably, my lord Viscount,' he said, 'but I will ask you this. If you had been put to such a proof as I—if you had shot at Donna Hold—what would you have made of it?'

'I do not shoot at ladies, my lord,' said the young man.

'Nor do I, pardieu! I shoot for them,' said the Earl; 'I shoot for a prize.'

Messire Bernart, as he turned on his heel, saw the whole cavalcade from the pavilion approach. Ahead of it came Mabilla, cantering her barb. She had a good deal of colour by now—bright splashes of it in her cheeks. Her eyes wandered a little, as if she was scared at herself; but she did not falter in what she was about. She rode past her brother, not appearing to see him; she drew rein by the watching Earl.

He was all in a sweat, could hardly see out of his eyes; he bowed awkwardly and stumbled forward toward her; he kissed her foot. She made a little sign, a quick look down; he read it, and she suffered him to lift her from the saddle. He had nothing to say, but stood shuffling before her.

The armed troop, headed by the two Bishops and Donna Hold, were halted within earshot. Every soul of them heard what followed—a momentous conversation for some of them.

The girl paled for a moment and put a hand to her side. Her too quick breathing seemed

to alarm her. Then she threw her head back and held the hand out.

'I am told, my lord, that you have asked for this from my uncles.'

Pikpoyntz opened his mouth, grew grey ; then plump he knelt upon the grass. 'I do not get up from my knees until you answer me ! Why do you give me so much ?'

'Because you are a man.'

'A man ? Not a brute ?'

'All men are brutes, perhaps. But you show yourself a man, having risked that which they tell me you prize.'

'And is this the prize ? Is this the prize ?'

'If you call me so, my lord.' The Earl of Pikpoyntz leaped to his feet. The workings of his ungainly joy made him look like a satyr—a maimed beast whose one leer has to serve him for joy and sorrow. Which of these passions drove over him now there is no saying. There was a chance he might have fallen raving, 'O God, I am vile !' have turned, fled the world and beaten himself to heaven in a cloister. Instead, the madness of triumph got hold of him. He sprang forward and caught her in his arms : he engulfed her, had her in the air. She learned what it was to be kissed, she lost herself—for a moment.

He hoisted her high in the air, at the very stretch of his great arms ; she faced the people, saw her uncle's desperate face for a minute. Eh ! but she saw more than that. She saw the sombre glow of the Renny crown. Then Pikpoyntz shouted at the top of his voice :—

'Ho, you there! Ho, all of you who serve
Pikpoyntz! This lady is the queen of you,
for she is the queen of me—she only! Hats off,
men of Pikpoyntz! On knees, every soul of you;
homage to the Countess!'

Down they fell to a man. Pikpoyntz set his lady on her feet, and himself fell before her. He kissed her foot; one by one, faced by the speechless host from the West, the household came up and followed their lord in the devotion. She stood it like a pillar of ice. Then Pikpoyntz drew his long sword and waved it over his head.

'God and the Countess Mabilla! Ho! Ho!
Ho!' he roared.

'God and the Countess! God and the Countess!' they echoed with a will.

'Advance, men of Havilot—Ha! Joyeux
Saber!' sang out Messire Bernart; and the spear-men came on.

CHAPTER XV

THE RENNY WAY

PIKPOYNTZ had just time to blow a shrill scream on his horn before he picked up his lady again. With her in his arms he ran back to the archway that gave on to safety and the terrace. There he set her down, but not before he had strained her to his breast and kissed her ardently. ‘Into the house, my soul,’ he said, ‘into the house and you are safe. You will find madam my aunt at your service, and a whole shire. I will hold these gentry until my men are out.’

‘Then madam your aunt must be her own company for a little, my lord,’ said Mabilla. ‘I intend to see you hold them.’ She stood on the upper step of the terrace, a gay, fluttering little Bellona in green, and saw the steel cohort come on. There had been, perhaps, no time for her to inquire why the Countess of Gru was ready for her within the walls or why the Pikpoyntz bowmen waited a signal without them. All that came upon her much later.

Just now she had enough to see. Pikpoyntz, with squared, grim shoulders and his long blade,

filled up the gateway. The homagers of a moment before huddled apart ; her Uncle Havilot, foaming and purple, was now rushing on his destruction. Such it was, for he was blind with rage and blinded his horse with spurring. There were barely twenty yards between him and his foe ; but he drove the spurs into the heels, spurred and spurred again. The white eyes of the beast gleamed like streaks. On he came at a tearing gallop. Pikpoyntz, cool as a night frost, waited for him, chose his last moment and brought his sword down crash on the horse's crest. The poor beast dropped on the very threshold of the gate ; but the Bishop did not stop. He was thrown forward against the wall ; there was a sickening crash. Pikpoyntz picked him up, dead beyond recognition. Next minute he had to drop his burden, for he had the Viscount upon him, and the next his bowmen lined the terrace wall and a company of halberdiers stood behind him in the gate.

‘*Hola ! halt !*’ cried the Earl. The Prince-Bishop put up his hand and stopped the cavalry. Bernart was hacking furiously at his man.

‘Lord Viscount,’ said Pikpoyntz, parrying with great coolness, ‘I have no intention of killing the brother of my future wife, and even less of being killed by him. I suggest to you that we allow Donna Hold to join her cousin on the terrace. Then we can discuss our affairs unhampered. What do you say ?’

‘I say that you are a drain rat whom to kill were to honour. Nevertheless, I will kill you if I can.’ The Viscount spoke breathlessly and

renewed his attack. Pikpoyntz warded a swinging cut, countered with the flat blade and caught the other a lively blow on the sword wrist. The sword flew out of his hand. Pikpoyntz, quick as thought, set his foot upon it.

'Now, young lord, I have you at discretion. Cease to play the fool and I will let you grow to be a man.' He sheathed his own blade as he spoke and walked coolly out to meet the Prince-Bishop. Bernart could have stabbed him between the shoulders, but did not; Pikpoyntz knew he would not.

'A word with you, Prince-Bishop,' said the Earl.

'It is my wish, my lord,' said Grand-Fé, peering at him through half-shut eyes.

'Need I tell a man of your discernment that I have the whole of your troop at my disposition? I cannot suppose your lordship so headstrong as your brother; who yet, poor man, was not strong enough in the head. We will look at him shortly. You do not, of course, forget that I hold a certain pretty hostage of yours, on whose white hands you should look with a lenient eye. Hey, Prince-Bishop?'

Grand-Fé's lips twitched. 'Where is my child, Pikpoyntz?' he said under his breath.

'Hey, but in a position of trust and honour, my good Prince. I have every care for her.'

'Too much, I have sometimes feared, my lord.'

'Fear nothing, my Prince. You need not, at least, if you can instil some sense into that young

gamecock from the West. The lady in both our minds at present will come to no harm in that case.' The Prince-Bishop considered.

'There shall be no folly on our part, my Lord of Pikpoyntz,' he said, after he had thought. 'My poor brother! My poor, rash brother! My niece Mabilla, however (it is proper your lordship should remember), is betrothed to a very great person.'

'She does not appear to recognise the contract,' said the Earl.

'She is very young, my lord.'

'But not a minor, I think, Prince?'

'Not a minor, it is true. But by all the laws of Church and State affianced.'

'Church, I have always found, Prince-Bishop, will undo what State hath no taste for. Will your Don John care to wed one who is, after all, only a possible heiress of Coldscaur?'

'Doth your lordship then care so much?'

'By my soul, I have never cared for anything if I care not!' cried Pikpoyntz. 'But enough of that,' he added. 'I am not here to talk love. I can talk that elsewhere. Have I your lordship's word of honour that we conduct our negotiations without swords?'

'You have, my lord,' said Grand-Fé, 'but not here. We must bury our dead. We will go to Canhoe.'

'As you please, my dear lord,' said Pikpoyntz, and, bowing, turned away. In the presence of the defaced Bishop Stephen even Messire Bernart veiled his sword. Mabilla came down the steps,

insisted on seeing the poor wreck ; but had to cover her eyes. Havilot had died horribly, and now grinned and squinted in death. The shock of contact with the wall had broken his stiff Renny neck and driven inward the firm Renny jaws till his upper teeth bit his chin. Grand-Fé, very white, knelt and prayed ; Bernart, unmanned, had tears streaming through his fingers ; Mabilla led Hold into the house. Only Pikpoyntz stood, silent and grim and inevitable as the fact ; few forms of death were new to him.

Grand-Fé rose from his knees and looked to the lord of the soil for direction. Pikpoyntz nodded his head. ‘They are coming,’ he said. So then servants came and covered the dead man with a cloth and put him on a bier, and so bore him into the chapel of the castle. There they laid him out in state, with gloved and folded hands and a crozier under them. But they kept a napkin over his face. Two friars were fetched over from Beauchef in a hurry to watch ; the chaplain of Speir said a requiem, and at intervals the proper psalms.

In the castle Mabilla dismissed her chosen lord and her ally and alone waited the assault which she knew must come. Bernart, of Joyeulx Saber, began it. ‘Oh, Mabilla, oh, sister,’ says he, ‘think what you are about ! There is no stain upon your father’s name, nor any of your winning upon that of our common mother ; yet this marriage you are for hath an ugly look in our eyes. What ! you will lie in a bloody bed ; hold his hands who is fresh from dabbling in your own

blood—fie ! fie ! Look now, Mabilla, I suppose this gross thief hath slain treacherously six of your own people. What hath he done with the one surviving ? He says that she has given him the slip. Who knows ? Do you believe it ? And say that she has escaped him yet, will he not catch her in the end ? And her end will be what ? She stands between him and your great royalty—will he let her stand ? Ah, do you believe it ? Shake off, my dear—oh, shake off ! Let us get back to our vineyards, our songs and green thickets of the West, and wash our hands and live innocently. Come, my sister, we are for home ! ’ The generous young man had tears in his eyes as he ended an appeal which delicacy forbade him to make more urgent. The man had been chosen by his sister ; he could go no further in decency than call him murderer and thief. Mabilla let him hold her hands ; she smiled, shook her head at him, would not speak till he showed signs of beginning again.

Then she interposed. ‘ Ah, Bernart, amic,’ she said in their own familiar tongue (which added to his anguish and certainty at once), ‘ ah, Bernart, amic, if we had had the same father as well as mother you would not have spoke me so bitterly, nor I seemed so hard in retort. Bernart, we must go our ways—you to Campflors, I to Marvilion. I have chosen, Bernart ; if you were Renny you would know why. I am a girl ; I must marry ; for I am a Renny, and Renny must reign. And since I must be a queen of my own people I must have a king consort ; I must marry a man. So I

choose not for Don John—I will not mix my blood with Flahault's; but De Salas I will accept of because he has no fear, and if he has remorse does not betray it, and if he sins, sins not in the dark. You call him thief, assassin; he takes no heed of you—why should I? Enough for me—let it be enough for you—that I have worked for myself to find a way in this business; I believe that you wrong him. Let us part in peace, Bernart!

But he would not have it. He entreated her, he threatened, he began to command. And then she sent him about his business and would have no more to say. The Prince-Bishop tried a different road, but got no nearer. He warmed upon the subject of Don John; she said, 'He is a Flahault.' He remembered his profession—the Church had affianced her, etc. She replied that if babies were brought to the Church, the Church should not allow them to learn walking, or at least she should keep the door shut. 'There is no painted glass over an open door, good uncle,' said she; 'one sees the sun out there.' Being the man he was, he temporised—supposed she would be wed from Joyeux Saber. No? Then from his poor house of Canhoe? 'Your house would be the poorer for my presence, my lord,' she answered, laughing; 'for if it hold me and my lord it would be beggared of my brother Bernart and cousin Hold.'

'What will you do then, in Heaven's name?' cried Grand-Fé. 'I shall marry in Heaven's name, I hope,' she said. 'There are churches in Pikpoyntz.

To-day I go to Beauchef with the Countess of Gru.' Grand-Fé had a last shot—a raking shot, too. 'Do you know, my child, of the name your chosen husband bears in these parts? The name of libertine, by my head. There was a lady here before the old Countess of Gru set on foot.' 'Ah, yes, indeed,' said Mabilla gravely. 'A lady with a pretty name. Blanchmains it was. Your lordship's knowledge of her is of some standing, I think?'

'I know her—yes,' said the Prince-Bishop, rather scared.

'And, having trusted my Lord of Pikpoyntz with her, you see no hurt for me in the same care?' Her words bit him; he thought her made of ice. They bit him and beat him. He became a piteous old man all at once. 'If,' he began with a dry tongue, 'if you should see, or hear of, or by chance fall upon some way, get speech with, perhaps, this Blanchmains, I would have you give her this, my child.' He stammered much more than my parentheses will import, and as he handed his niece a small packet he was careful not to look at her. Mabilla was touched. 'I will not fail you, dear uncle,' she told him. Then she knelt for his blessing, got it, and kissed him farewell. She saw him but once more. With Hold she took a high hand, being still angry with the Viscount. With her also Hold was cool. 'Good-bye, cousin Mabilla. We are each for a wedding and a crown, it seems. Yours will have more points than mine.'

'I had not thought of the crown of Pikpoyntz,

I confess,' said Mabilla. 'My lord fights bare-headed, I think.' 'Ah, it is the crown of Renny,' said the bright-eyed Hold, with a sharper tone than usual; 'that is a slippery thing. It hath slipt from poor cousin Sabine; take care how you walk with it.' She was as smiling, as beautiful, and as lazy as ever; she did her stabbing with a languid air. Mabilla sniffed the offence. 'I will hold the Renny crown as long as I want it, Hold, and then I will give it to you,' she said. 'Ah, my dear,' said Hold, waving it away. Then she kissed the rebel's cheek and trailed away. The whole cavalcade, with bearers for the dead Havilot, took the western road in mid-afternoon.

Immediately they were gone she gave the Countess of Gru to understand that they too must set out for Beauchef that night. The old lady twinkled, but, since she could refuse her nothing, agreed. The truth was, Madam Mabilla had no taste for the ardours of courtship—none, indeed, for courtship at all. She intended to marry Pikpoyntz, after which let come what pertained; but she did not intend to be hugged in the fashion of that day's afternoon. The times had been stirring, she stirred with them—but, heigho! the sap was run out; she must husband the fibre against her need. Until the hour of departure she kept her room, not noticing overmuch that Nitidis was hovering about her. She sat in her window and thought of marriage. It would be idle to pretend that the subject did not interest her. It interested her vastly; she was very

curious, but not in any such way as to be timid or to get heart beats. Her thought was this :—Here I, Mabilla, set the crown of Renny on my head. Is the price too high?

She pinched her lip before she answered. ‘No! Too high for most maids, but not too high for me. The man is huge, may be gross ; his way is to carve a way by strokes, to quell with a roar, or, more dreadful still, to glower and say nothing. I meet him at all points. He will not carve me, because he is in love with me ; if he roars I shall be quiet ; if he is silent, if he glowers, I shall certainly laugh. Then he will roar, and the play will begin again ; but it will stop short of carving. It seems to me an advantage that he loves me, and that I love—nobody.’ Here she sighed, and found Nitidis at her feet. ‘Good child, good child,’ said Mabilla, stroking her cheek. ‘I believe I do love somebody after all.’ ‘Him that gave your Ladyship the silver Christ?’ hazarded the maid. Mabilla blushed, laughed a little and looked out of the window.

It seemed, now that he was remembered, as if she felt herself free to think more tenderly of Master Lanceilhot—that doubting pale youth with the fringed and pathetic eyes ; that singing boy who never hid from any one that he loved her with all his little soul. What would he say of all this? She knew what he would say ; for his tractate upon marriage was lying yet in her bosom, not far from the silver Christ. Her soul was his, *quoth he* ; therefore let Barsaunter and Pikpoyntz bicker for her body. Dear good

Lanceilhot—how he would quail at a lift of the brows, and yet, Madam the Virgin, how he could hector you for a slip in ‘Vitas hinnuleo !’ He was the perfect philosopher of Love, who would preach by the hour on the glory of the lover—and then flinch and grow pale and flush to tears at a chance word ! Poor dear, good Lanceilhot ! There was a tinge of scorn in her pity ; but she had not forgotten him. ‘I believe I will write a letter,’ said Mabilla, and got up. It was a very short letter, to this effect :—

To the honoured poet and worthy clerk, my friend, Master Lanceilhot, etc. Let this be delivered with haste.

Good Master Paulet, I greet you and wish you very well. The friendship there is between us moves me to write you my news. My Lord Earl of Pikpoyntz has bid me to a marriage he is to make shortly, and in such sort that I can scarcely refuse to be present. Not in the same sort, yet in great honesty, I in turn bid you to be there also. If you will sing to me again, or if you have observed your promise concerning that Chanson de Reini which you were to make for me, let it come with you to the Earl’s marriage supper. But I know not how you stand in such matters. There are many things I know not yet. And so I commend me to your prayers, and you to God. From Beauchef this mid-September. Your loving friend, M. de R.

‘Let this letter be despatched by certain messenger, Nitidis,’ she said. Nitidis promised ; and then Donna Mabilla left Speir with her own women, in the company of the old Countess of Gru. Pikpoyntz, refused anything higher than her hand, went lower for his comfort, and kissed

her two feet. ‘Ah, my lord,’ said she with mock ruefulness, ‘that is what I shall come to learn, I suppose.’

‘Heart of my heart,’ cried he, really scandalised, ‘I would cut my feet off if I thought it!’ ‘It would be simpler to run away on them,’ she said. ‘Farewell, my good lord.’ Pikpoyntz went glowing to prayers, and confessed all his sins to his chaplain that night. The worthy man’s hair stood on end—and so visibly that the penitent decided it might be prudent to hang him next morning. Then he went out to a rude awakening.

Frélus was announced, and came in booted, hot and splashed with mire.

‘Well, Frélus?’ said the Earl.

‘News, my dread lord—a letter.’

‘He took and read :

“Sovereign and only master of me! I write joyfully, in good heart. News, news, news! Our wise hound singleth! His nose is close to the scent, his tail is a flag! We have certain news, sure news! I write more anon. From your poor, faithful bondmaid, Blanchmains.”

‘O God, have mercy!’ groaned the late ravished penitent to himself. ‘Am I to slip in filth for ever?’ He paced the room, plucking out handfuls of beard. Then he turned, terrible, on Frélus.

‘Get you back on the instant,’ he thundered; ‘get you back, I say! Keep all of Marvilion within the borders, let no soul cross into Pikpoyntz, and let none from Pikpoyntz enter. It is death for who comes or goes. I will send word anon. Let Madam Blanchmains do as I bade her. Tell her

this : “ Hunt, hunt, hunt ! And take alive.” Do you hear ? Take alive, take alive ! Repeat it.’

Frélus shook. His voice shook with him as he chattered : ‘ Hunt, hunt, hunt ! And take alive !’

‘ Right so,’ said his master, ‘ shall you say to her that sent you. Now go.’

The Earl ran headlong to the chapel to pray more. But he could not. Blanchmains came about him, fawning, writhing for love—Blaise de Renny moved under his shroud—Sabine’s hateful injured eyes—the wry grin of battered Havilot—Mabilla, his saint, with lips all grey, stared reproach at him from her death-bed and with one red finger pointed to her heart. Ah, Christ, there was no heart there !—only a horrible hole where a heart had been. He fell flat on the floor of his chapel ; and there the creeping dawn found him.

He was for ever at Beauchef during the next month and a half, waiting upon his beloved, with his eyes dogging her ardent steps (and clogging them thereby), spelling for her lips and getting now and then a chance to brush her hand. If he would have talked of what he knew she would have listened by the week together ; but, Heaven help him ! he must become a poet, oil his shock hair, tag his points, slash his doublet, posture and vapour and prance. She would never confess it, but she was near sick of her bargain before it was struck.

The settlements he made were lavish, ‘ ridiculous ’ was her word for them. Fully half Pik-poyntz was in her jointure, and fat manors, market tolls, harbour dues, anchorages, groundages and

such like at Coste Salas and other places in East Mark. He gave her a forest in Logres, which he held by Grand Sergeanty. The lady's reversion to Marvilion was brought into settlement, but he would not touch her lands in Campflors. He gave her absolute rights of appointment to three abbeys, the advowsons of as many churches in Pikpoyntz as she chose, and I know not what else beside. Rich as she had been before, if Marvilion fell as it should she would have the dowry of a queen when the Earl came to be hanged. When these things were done the Countess of Gru took her nephew aside and said : 'Pikpoyntz, if you hope to marry this little lady do you flee the country until the day comes. Fight, rob, ravish, kill whom you choose, but stay not here curling your hair, or you will never get her to church, still less to a better place. I know her.' He obeyed and rode North, nominally on a hunting expedition.

CHAPTER XVI

CANZON DE REINI—PART I

THE *sereina* is the song they sing in Campflors at the going out of the light. When the scented garden is muffled in dark, when the stars are his only candle and the rustling trees his only kind voices, the lover leans against the wall near which, as he believes, his lady pillows her cheek also ; and he begins low, plucking but two shy chords, as if he was afraid to break upon the lovely peace of the world. You would think he might be sad, wrought upon by the emptiness and dark ; but the Campflors lover is never sad. Come the worst, he loves. Nothing can deprive him of that ; and with that for his food the veriest sup of his lady's sight will stay him. It is Love he loves, not a lady ; so his philosophy is unassailable. The beloved may not alone be pillowing behind the jutted balcony ; perhaps that lord her husband is there too ; perhaps she is suckling her second son—what then ? It is the holy sable night, it is the galaxy above—that snowy flood poured out on a bed of hyacinth—it is the crisping trees, the gently stealing night wind ; it is a secret awe he

feels for one maid's shape, for the turn of one lovely head—for this, for these he sighs out the wistful patience of his *sereina*. She, up there snug abed, hardly hears him, or if she does weaves him into the pleasant tangle of her dream. She lies down complacent ; all is well with her—he takes the lute. Her eyelids droop, the hand at her cheek relaxes, slips out ; she is fast—he leans against the wall and sings on :

The lover with sighing
Saith, Day, thou and I are long in dying !
Now, Eve,
Gather me close and list while I hope and grieve.

Master Lanceilhot Paulet, that assured poet, received his lady's summons while he was engaged pouring Aristotle out of a too viscous Latin into a too fluid vernacular. Aristotle vanished in the process, but the result was very much in the manner of Campflors, since it rendered a thesis of moral philosophy not inappropriate to a schema of love. The moment he received he kissed it ; then, getting up, he put it on the desk before him, knelt down, said a short prayer (the paternoster), got up, crossed himself and stooped to kiss it again. He was like a priest of the altar at the Pax. Finally he felt sufficiently composed to read it, and did so without moving a muscle of his expressive face.

This done, without a moment's thought upon so startling a news, he got up and went to the door. He paused here to bestow his letter safely in his bosom before letting in a profane draught ; then he went out into the corridor and down

stairs to the apartments of the Reverend Prior. He knelt to the good man for a blessing, and then—‘Reverend Father,’ he said, ‘I crave your licence to go on a journey.’

‘Where now, Lanceilhot?’ asked the Prior.

‘I must go to Beauchef, in Pikpoyntz, reverend Father, to a certain castle in those parts.’

‘Mary of Bethany!’ cried the Prior, ‘that is twenty days’ journey.’

‘Thirty, my Father,’ said Lanceilhot.

‘Why, boy, why! Will you pad for a month?’

‘It will take me six weeks, my Father, the way I must travel.’

‘Tut-tut-tut!’ The Prior was vexed. ‘Six weeks to go, six to stay, six to return—eighteen weeks. Pest, my young friend!’

‘Your pardon, Reverend Father, it will be less than that—twelve weeks and one day.’

‘Hey! Let me know what this day’s work may be which costs you twelve weeks to perform it.’

For answer Lanceilhot took out his letter and offered it in both hands to his master. It was as if he were handing a relic. The Prior read and frowned; frowned again and read.

‘If I were you, my friend, I should not pursue this summons,’ he reported, with decision.

Lanceilhot looked to see if his Reverend Prior had lost his senses.

‘Not go!’ he gasped. ‘My Father, I do not understand you. How not go?’

‘If you know so well how to go, you know

how not to go, I suppose. Reverse the process involved.'

Lanceilhot had very little sense of the humorous, and certainly none for such a business as this. He continued in a voice of awe.

'How not go, Father? It is the day of her marriage, her most sacred marriage.'

'Sacred grandmother!' cried the Prior. 'Is not that the best reason in the world to be done with this dangling?'

'I hardly follow you, Reverend Father. What hath her marriage to do with my love?'

'God bless us! Why, everything!' Lanceilhot smiled.

'Ah, no,' said he. 'I can prove it to you in a minute. My lady marries. I love her. How connect the two propositions? They are wholly disparate. Say she loved her husband—which, of course, she does not—how does that affect my love for her? Let us not confuse subject and object. And how does it affect her, indeed? For if she loves not me, what does it matter whom she loves? In truth and naturally enough, she loves nobody.'

'How the deuce do you know that, boy?'

'It is obvious, my Father. We love always the perfect thing—as a lady may love God, or a man a lady. But she is perfect, therefore she loves the perfect thing; which is to say that she loves herself.'

'And is she not somebody, dolt?'

'I can only contemplate her soul, my Father, which hath no parts.'

'Humph!' said the Prior; 'I recommend you to contemplate her soul from a distance, otherwise there may fall out an argument with my Lord of Pikpoyntz concerning parts.'

Lanceilhot set out that evening with a lute, a wallet full of poems and some bread and cheese. He sang his way from hall to cloister, from cloister to hall, until he reached Fauconbridge, which is the border town between Logres and Pikpoyntz. He had had the wit to avoid Marvilion, which otherwise had saved him three weeks' footsoreness. No adventures had befallen him on the way which were at all out of his experience. Two or three giggled confessions of love behind a door or so—love and a fluttering pain; 'Just here, good Lanceilhot—ah! feel it for yourself'; a little ruffling from one or two young blades who wished his eyeing and sighing at the devil; much good cheer from abbey parlours; enthusiasm and wet eyes from a circle of nodding nuns,—these and a tearing patrol of horsemen, who knocked him flying into the mud one dark night, compose his pictures of travel. The patrol scarcely stopped to see what they had dispersed. 'On the King's business—clear!' they yelled at him, and 'Room for the Prince's messengers—ho!' He found out next day that they were a flying post from the Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fé to His Highness Don John. Putting two and two together, he felt it his duty to interfere. He borrowed a horse and pelted after the pelters, caught them outside Quatrepais and accosted them.

‘Good day, my masters,’ he said as he rode alongside. ‘You seek his Grace the Prince?’

‘Who told you that, sprout?’

‘The whole country reports it. You will not find him by that road.’

‘How now? Who and what are you to tell me my business?’

‘One who knows it better than you, sir. I am from the West. Ten nights ago the Prince lay at Saint Save. By now he is at Kains, or maybe Unthank.’

‘Hope of Heaven, is this true?’

‘It should be true,’ quoth Lanceilhot.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the party take a road which must add at least a fortnight to their journey in search of Don John. ‘If so small a lie can work a great service,’ said he to himself, as he rode back, ‘what may I not do for my blessed lady as I grow more experienced? I see a career before me—holy orders, a pastoral staff, a cardinal’s hat! The love of beautiful ladies should be a wing to a man; it shall be so to me. And since I love the most beautiful lady in the world, my wing should lift me to the fine blue air she herself breathes.’ He swore to himself that it should be so. He would rise, but not by poetry. ‘Poetry cannot give me the handling of men. That is your real power. Poetry should inform such dealing, be the substance of it, transfigure and make work lovely; it is not work enough alone unless it is allied to politics, as where a man makes a packed assembly his instrument and plucks at their heartstrings to

wring a terrible music of events from those. Eh, Lord, Lord !' he cried, with clenched lifted-up hands, 'I feel the working of this exalted mood already ! When I sing the song of Renny in the hall of Speir I will rock the foundations of it with the music I shall make !'

He finished his journey occupied with these great thoughts, and reached Pikpoyntz in mid-November to see the first snow dusting the shoulders of its gaunt fells. Speir also he saw afar off, shining like a cloud, high above the mist. 'My lady will be near heaven in her cage,' he said, and pushed on. Beauchef he found to lie in a sheltered valley, a little grey-walled town stooping to a dark river. At its highest point was a many-turreted house, with terraces looking over the vassal burgh. That was the house of the old Countess of Gru.

Six months had wrought a change in each, but, while Mabilla wondered over Lanceilhot, he saw her exactly as before. This was because he was a poet and she none. He had once for all made her image, had set it up, prayed daily before it. It would never change. But in him she saw nothing of the appealing boy, nothing of the craver who had fallen to clasp her knees and flinched at a lifted eye-brow. She saw a pale, serious young man, perfectly respectful, incurably her servant, but seeming to count upon her knowledge of this, not caring to repeat the assurance, and so much master of himself as in some respects to be master of her—though neither she nor he guessed it. And there was another

thing—Lanceilhot the poet was his own looking-glass, forever acting a part before it. He was acting before it now when he first met her ; he was ‘handling men,’ and carefully critical how he did it. But Mabilla was as open as the day, had no looking-glass, and could not have acted anything to save her life. Her dismay, therefore, to see the new Lanceilhot put her perfectly at the discretion of the real Lanceilhot. He began to feel the pricking of his wings.

She was unfeignedly glad to see him ; she blushed a little, was a little shy. ‘Oh, Lanceilhot,’ it was, ‘so you have come ! You are faithful, then ?’

He took her hand, kissed it once, and dropped it gently. ‘Lady, you know that I am faithful,’ he said.

‘Yes, yes, I know it, of course. My very good friend indeed. And how did you come ?’

‘On foot, my lady, by way of Fauconbridge. So I was able to do you a service.’

‘What was this service, Lanceilhot ?’ Then he told her of the Prince-Bishop’s flying messengers whom he had been careful to misdirect. Mabilla was amused, but thoughtful.

‘That bodes trouble ahead, my friend.’

‘I think so,’ he replied ; ‘but hope now that you will have time to make an ally.’

‘Does the alliance I am going to make please you, Lanceilhot ?’ she asked, without lifting her eyes from her toes.

‘My lady,’ said Lanceilhot, ‘it is of the nature of those things which a man must contemplate, if

he can, as a spectacle, since he can neither avert it nor mend it. Winter must follow summer and the night the day ; yet after winter and the night come summer again and day dawn. So we huddle and endure.'

'Do you huddle, Lanceilhot ?'

'At least I endure, my lady ; but indeed I do not see how I am worsened. I cannot love you any more, nor serve you the more diligently ; nor can you, I suppose, love me any less.'

Her eyes shone full upon him for a moment, full of that divine seriousness she could assume when she was startled. But it was only for a moment ; the next she hung her head.

'Ah, but you must not talk like that !' she said, and began to pluck at the cushion.

'My sacred lady,' said he, looking closely at her, 'let me once more say that I must blink no facts with you. I have not walked six hundred miles for nothing. It is as certain that I love you much and you love me little as that my Christ is upon that chain.' Her silver dress was cut low in the neck ; he saw the chain and knew where the Christ was. This fact, which should have set his temples beating like drums, in his present exalted mood kept him chill as frost.

She sprang up with both hands at her bare neck. She was pale and shaking. 'Oh, shame, shame, I am ashamed ! Leave me ; I will not speak to you again !' He dropped on one knee, and then left her. From afar he saw her that same night when she sat on the dais at supper with the Countess of Gru, but he was near enough

to see that there was no fine silver chain on her neck. She wore a rope of emeralds ; the Christ was certainly not there. ‘It must be put back,’ he told himself, ‘otherwise I shall feel that I have betrayed my new wings. Should I tell her of my present hopes and thought? No, surely. She will know soon enough.’

The Countess sent a message down the hall that he was to sing after supper. Sing he did, watching Mabilla all the time. She took no notice of him whatever ; he could hardly be sure that she heard him. Candidly, he would not have blamed her if she had not, for he sang the customary flatteries, as his duty was, to the châtelaine. The ‘Lioness of the North’ was the venerable Countess of Gru. Then came reference to an astonishing natural fact. This lioness, according to Lanceilhot, sprang from a mating of eagles—at least, there was plain reference to the eyrie at Speir. But from the same portentous bed had come the ‘Red Bull of the North,’ who, running furiously for a mate, saw a white hind in a ‘flowery meadow’ and took her home.

This confused zoology pleased the old Countess. It seemed to her new. ‘Your little poet, my dear, has a bold tongue in his head,’ she remarked to her neighbour. ‘I hope it may not be in his cheek,’ said Mabilla, who was finer than the Countess.

‘Of what is my ice-cloaked goddess thinking?’ pondered Lanceilhot, as he watched her set brows. ‘Have I angered her? God forgive me, but I fear I must do it again!’ Then he sang a fable

in their own tongue. The favourite nymph of the goddess Diana strayed often alone into a grove of flowering thorns. ‘Love at least is far from me now,’ she said. ‘My lady’s brother, with his piercing songs, cannot fret me here.’ Here, in this fragrant place, she would come; and since there were none to spy her, she would loosen her zone and lie unbusked upon the grass. And one day she felt a stinging near her heart, and looking down saw that she had lain upon a small shoot of thorn, which, with the tender spine of it, had brushed against her side. ‘Lie close, lie close, my goddess,’ said the shoot, ‘for by thy holy warmth I shall live.’

The nymph caressed it and let it lie; nor did she disdain to come daily to the same place and nourish the pushing plant. But, Oi, Deus! the shrub grew hardy and the fleshy spines took on a sheath. ‘Ahi, my thorn!’ cried she, ‘thou hast prickt my side. Is it so thou bitest thy foster-nurse?’ ‘Blessed my lady,’ said he then, ‘such poor speech have I that in no other sort can I tell thee how thy sacred pains nourish me. Lo you, I am growing to a forest tree. Thou hast given me life; now let me live to show forth thy praise.’ When the tree grew even as he had said, the nymph found him strong to lean upon, and full of the smell of spring; and thorny though he could be, she could lean all day without smart. For his thorns were for her enemies and his fragrance and strength forth from her.

Immediately this performance was ended Mabilla excused herself to the Countess and

retired. ‘Master Minstrel,’ said the latter, ‘I find your melody much to my taste, though I did not understand a word of your fable. Pray sing it to me in a more reasonable language.’ Lanceilhot, bowing, sang a very ordinary little story about a Viscount and a mulberry tree. Every Good Friday morning the mulberry tree bore three berries. The Viscount, who had been a desperate heretic, was converted by this means to believe in the Blessed Trinity and in time became a prior of the Order of the Grand Chartreuse.

The Countess was much edified. ‘A very proper fable indeed,’ she said, ‘but I hope it has no reference to the ancestry of my future niece.’ ‘Ah, none in the world, my lady,’ Lanceilhot assured her. ‘I had not thought Donna Mabilla so easily affected to devotion,’ mused the Countess, ‘but no doubt in her native speech the thought comes more poignantly to her.’ ‘Tis very like, my lady,’ says the sage Lanceilhot.

He got no further speech with her until the eve of her wedding day—though he spoke at her in song plainly enough. The place got very full of guests—once he had a sight of her led out to dance by the huge Earl her betrothed, and bore it with a courage which surprised himself. But on her wedding eve she sent for him. He found her pale, dark-eyed, adorably beautiful, and inclined to keep him at a distance. She was dressed in red, spangled with stars, and the gown was cut low enough to show her bosom. The silver Christ was not there. ‘Deus !’ thought he, ‘have I been a fool ?’

She motioned him to sit, when he had done his homage, but he would stand. By this means she had to look up at him as she spoke ; nothing she could do could keep a strain of appeal from her fine eyes, nor anything hide the anxiety she felt. He had never seen her nervous before ; it almost unmanned him. She spoke, too, lower than usual.

‘Are you to sing the *Canzon de Reini* to-morrow, Lanceilhot?’ says she. He bowed his head.

‘Part of it, my lady.’

‘What part?’

‘The song of the crown of Renny.’ She lighted up.

‘Ah, that is well! Of the crown I am to wear?’

‘Of the crown which you may wear if you choose, my lady,’ said Lanceilhot.

‘Choose? Choose?’ she cried. ‘But I have chosen. Am I of a sort, do you think, to refuse such a thing?’

‘Ah, who knoweth before the hour what the crown shall tell?’

She threw up her head. ‘I am not one whom the hour may tell, but rather I tell the hour.’

‘Ah, who knoweth?’ he said again.

She touched his arm. ‘Tell me what you will sing to-morrow.’

‘I sing the song of the crown of Renny. It will be an evening song—*sereina*.’

‘*Sereina?* Evening?’ She was dismayed.

‘Surely. It will be dark when I pluck the lute string. Shall I sing of dawn in the twilight?’

‘Is my crowning a thing of twilight, Lanceilhot?’

He looked at her. ‘Your royal head, lady, was made to be lifted up—to front the day. Your straight white brows, your hair, the sovereignty which floateth about you—these are your crown. If you superadd another of man’s fashioning it must obscure that which is of the fashioning of Heaven. So it is twilight, mayhap.’ For a moment she faltered; then she flamed up.

‘Never, never! You talk very foolishly—silly cloister dreams—you are no better than a sickly monk now. The Renny crown is that of my fathers, of untold ancestry, of sovereign power over man, of pride never broken! *Plustost reini ge reina*—am I likely to forget that, being who and what I am? You should know me now, Lanceilhot. I shall never draw back—I will go on, although—although—ah, never mind the cost!’ She shook the tremble from her brain—clenched her hands—looked a queen. ‘Leave me, Lanceilhot. Sing as you will, you—even you—will not abate me. Renny calls me; a sovereign for the crown, and Renny for his own. Go now.’

He went. She stayed with an unkissed hand, and went cold to bed.

Next day the whole great household of them rode over the snowy hills to Speir, where the marriage was to be. Lanceilhot, in the ruck, barely saw the plumes on her palfrey’s crest. She was so muffled in furs that he could not have known her, nor if they had been thrown off would he have

found in the staring marbled woman his adorable ‘Artemis alert’ of the speaking lips. He thought, when he did see her in all the crusted glory of cloth of silver and jewels, that she had been turned to ice ; and the thought nerved him to hug all the closer what his heart held.

The chapel at Speir is not large, but even so it was barely full. There were many ecclesiastics —the canons from Beauchef, whose prior was to sing the nuptial Mass ; all the parish priests within a dozen miles, the singing men from Grand-Fé, a few cowled friars minor out of their convent at Montgrace—and then the Pikpoantz knights with their squires, Deir of Deira, the Baron of Withering, Sir John Vigors of Fauconbridge ; Melmer of Melmerfarrow, Hunslete, Perceforest, Cardoil, Vernon and Cantaluce—officers of the household, captains of companies, ladies, a pewful of nuns come to pray for their new patron, and so on. The Prince-Bishop stood with his chaplain, cross and train bearers, to give the bride to the bridegroom. She had no other friendly soul of old standing in the throng but he, and one other ; none who had known her as a child, nor any that had ever loved or taken joy in her. The thought of this cut Lanceilhot to the heart for a minute when he saw her come, heralded by trumpets at the door—a stiff little lonely image in silver brocade, stuck with gems on brow, fingers and neck. Behind her walked her train-bearers, pages, no women.

This desolating, lonely appearance made her seem to him like a figure for high tragedy ; he

could have sworn her face was but the mask. Always delicately coloured, she looked wan now, seemed as if she walked by rote, with death on her ; he thought she had the carved, expressionless face of an archaic goddess ; the hard-set eyes, rigid mouth, stiff-set head stuck on marble neck, and death-chilled bosom. This horrible remoteness set her at judging distance ; he watched the espousal as if it had been a dance of mummers.

The wedding was followed by her coronation as Countess of Pikpoyntz and the homage of all the feudatories. Mabilla kindled a little at this evidence of royalty which figured a yet more fatal election, the burden of a far greater crown. Walking out of the chapel, her hand in her hulking lord's, Lanceilhot hailed the light in her eyes, the little fires which played over her cheeks. He lost his pity in his love, and exulted once more at the treasure he had. ‘This poor fool of an Earl thinketh her his ! Queen of Pikpoyntz, said he ; but I say, Queen of Heart-hold, queen by election and divine decree. Oh, to be done with all this mummery !’

In this mood he stood up in full hall to raise shrill and clear the canzon de Reini. To see the company was to guess the hold he had on them—the women with swimming eyes, the knights leaning on their elbows ; Pikpoyntz himself in his throne, fiery red and keen as a sword edge, had both hands on his knees, staring eyes and a working mouth. Shrike rolled his white eyeballs and chattered to himself. Music made the black go mad. Of the two Rennys there Grand-Fé was

ruddy and proud of the long tale of blood and ruin ; but Countess Mabilla was as cold again as a willow in the frost. She neither looked at the singer nor seemed to hear him. Yet every word stabbed her, and once or twice she shook so much that the old Countess of Gru began to watch her.

I am no rhapsodist. The canzon de Reini is long, and I must save my breath and yours. It began on a clear crying note, as a warning bell might ; longish lines of monotone which prayed the Trinity to bless the lord and lady of the house, the marriage-bed, the company, and last the singer. ‘ Jesu’s pains that purchased our peace, reive the bride from the burden of wrong ! ’ came as a wailed prayer. Lanceilhot struck the chords thrice. The lines shortened, the pace grew hasty as if he were following in the wake of Eudo’s black ships ; he thrashed the music as Eudo’s oars the sea ; he broke harshly, and then in a shriek of war—

Eudo the Wolf, stark as a steer,
Biteth the water, the waves with his teeth ;
Toothed is the prow—watch him and ’ware ;
Reini is laired in his loins !

In lines like these—with ever a moaning refrain, ‘ Out, haro ! the race is not run ! ’—he conducted the long blood chase of Renny.

One by one they trooped through the gathering dusk of the hall—fate-bitten ghosts in a gloomy place—wringing their hands, shuddering, chattering, or howling like the wind in the

chimney. What guests for a marriage feast! What candidates for a bloody crown! ‘The Greekish wife with blood-wetted locks’; ‘Red Blaise and the murder at night’; ‘Blaise for Blaise, thirst upon thirst’; the Sibyl, the infamous bed! It seemed by his account that no Renny could die at home for fear of that shameful bed. And so the song cried itself out, to come to the broken Tree and its three Shoots. And the Prince-Bishop sat on in the dark and glowed to think of deeds which he could not possibly perform; and in the dark also the little crowned bride sat straight in her chair, shaking, and wondered how long she could bear the grinding pain in her brows.

He sang of the three shoots (still standing in the twilight) of the race of Renny in a very different voice. At times he whispered it, at times soared high and clear; but the sound was, as it were, wet with tears; and at times he seemed to be praying. The burden of it was still, ‘Out, haro! the race is not run!’ but into it he read an urgency of his own. ‘Ah, for Jesu’s pains let sin die and the race run clean!’ The crown was painted horrible—soiled with blood. What brows could bear it?

Lawful is lordship, runneth the rune,
The crown for the hardy to hate or to kill—
Ha! But on Christ behoveth to call.
Hardy is she that cleaveth to love,
And under her breasts bindeth with bands
The giver of gladness, the god-given girdle—
Lo, she winneth the robe!
Lawful is lordship—Love is her lord.

She setteth her eyes to the sun, and her lips
Welcome the wind, and her heart taketh fire—
Golden the girdle—pray it for her !

And there he ended. Upon the hushed company, thrilling in the dark, came the sound of his lute strings as he cut them ; in the dark he escaped. Then they brought torches into the hall, and men looked on each other ; and the Countess of Gru's place was found as empty as that of the bride. Now it was needful that the bride should come in, so that the last ceremony might be done. The bridegroom was to carry her in his arms across the threshold of the inner doors ; the doors were to be shut and the guests to depart.

In her chamber the bride took no rest. Nitidis followed her feverish motions with faithful, desperate eyes. The bride stood fidgeting at the window, staring at the blue night, the ghostly white earth, crisping and uncrisping her hands. Sometimes she put one of them quickly into her neck ; sometimes it held her bosom, sometimes her heart below it. She would take a quick turn as if mindful of something, then abandon her purpose and go back to the window. Her agitation grew as her colour took flight. When she was ash colour Nitidis saw her lips separate and heard her begin to pant. She went close to her, thinking she might fall. ‘Dearest lady,’ she dared to say, ‘dearest, bravest lady.’ The bride’s wild eyes in their questing about the room fixed on her at last ; and, ‘Eh, is that you, Nitidis ? Have you not left me ?’ The maid began to cry.

‘Sorrow upon him who, knowing you, would

leave you now !' she cried unrestrainedly. The bride steadied herself with opened hands.

'I cannot be sure of any one now,' she said. 'I am alone—dead alone. Lanceilhot has left me.'

'Never, never !' cried Nitidis. 'Wait, I will fetch him.'

She flew. Lanceilhot, in the gateway, already facing the snow, felt a clutch at his arm, then a fierce voice, 'If you are a man and not a little pale devil, you will come to my lady.' So he went, was thrust in, and faced her.

She staggered toward him ; he thought she would have been in his arms.

'Oh, Lanceilhot, one word for me ! One word !'

'My lady, my lovely Mabilla, my soul !' He was kneeling ; she bade him rise.

'My time is almost come,' she said. 'I hardly know what I am about ! But I had to see you once before we go our ways. Look, Lanceilhot.'

She touched her open neck. He saw the silver chain. 'It will never leave me again, Lanceilhot.'

He could scarcely trust himself to speak. So they stood and trembled before each other ; and of the two he, whose need was sorer, recovered first. 'Let me see the Christ, Mabilla,' said he, 'for by Him we shall both be stronger.' She drew it from her bosom and held it to him ; he kissed it, and she after him before she slipped it home again.

Then once more they looked, and once more the trembling was upon them. But he said, 'Lady, I go to win you honour ; and do you stay

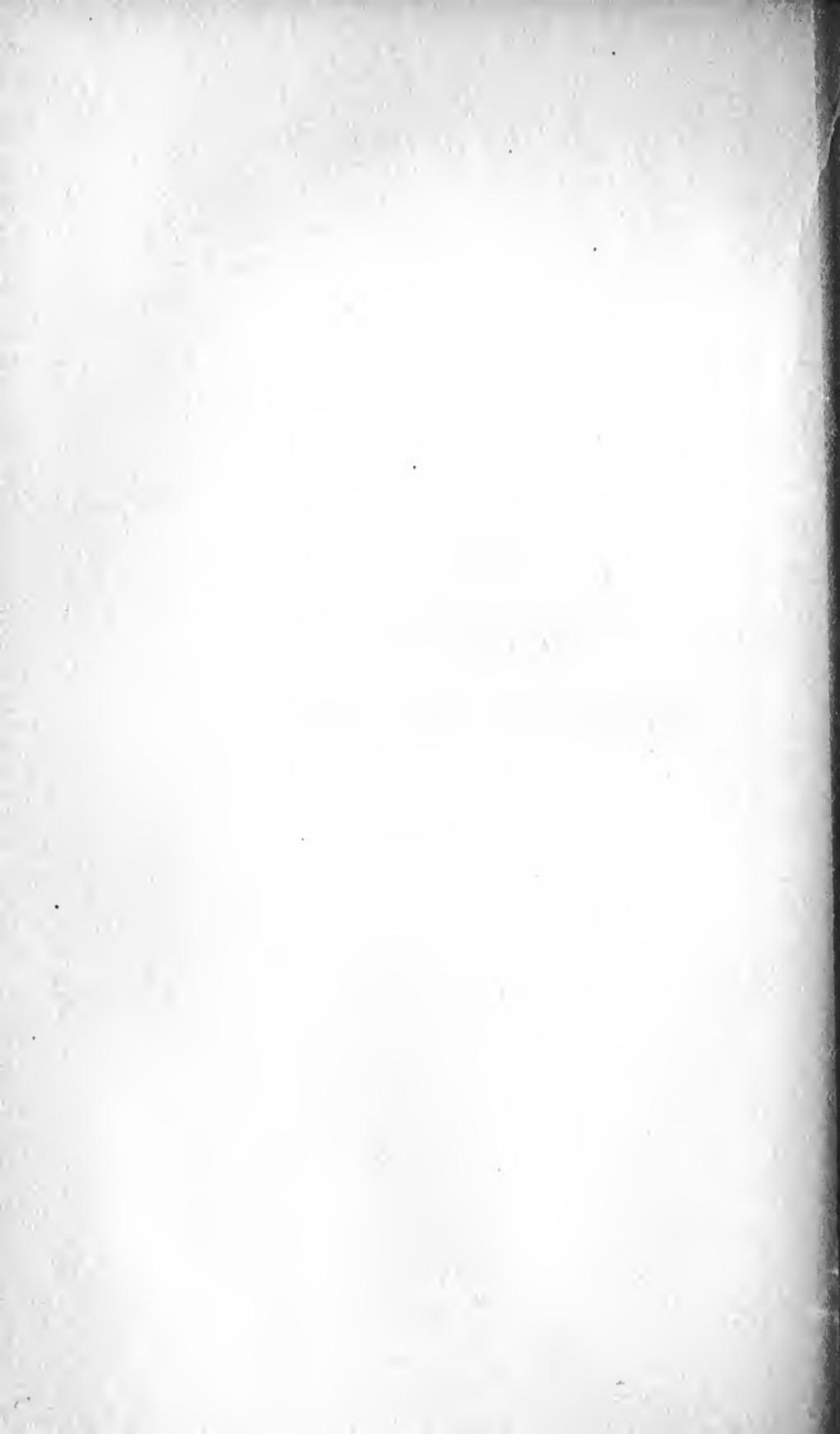
and gather honour ; and let each pray for each.' Then said she, 'Kiss me once, Lanceilhot' ; and 'So I will,' he answered, and knelt and kissed her hand.

'Now go down, Mabilla,' said he, 'to your lord in the hall.' Together, with her women about her, they went down.

The guests made a lane, and the great Earl came out to meet her. The trumpets brayed, all hands went up—'Ho ! for the Countess Mabilla !'

'Countess of Pikpoyntz and my bride,' roared the Earl. Then he picked her up in both arms and strode down the hall to the inner doors. They were flung open, and he with his still burden passed in. The doors were shut.

BOOK II
MISTRESS OF THE ROBE



CHAPTER I

THE CANDIDATE

THERE is a way by which a man becomes suddenly most vile, where lust of one sort or another leads him for a season, and lust pales before a new fear ; and fear inspires loathing for that which drew him once ; and to quell these two he pampers the brute he has in him. Such a fate befel Firmin the strapping youth who, hungering for Sabine's bloom, itched for her great possession after, and seizing on both ran away with them. After which came satiety of the one and terror lest he should be brought to account for the other ; but the common misfortunes of the road must be brought into settlement. These, unless you have solidity of your own or love's added fire, will beat the spirit out of you as soon as anything.

Headlong flight through mountain passes, thence down the eastern slopes to the sea, cost them what money they had. Firmin's high state of blood—reputed husband to a great lady—cost them their horses. They reached the coast town beggars ; not all the titles in the world could buy them a sup of food. Moreover, being still near

Pikpoyntz, he dared not trade on titles ; and the absence of a shilling forbade him even mental ruffling. For you can be as lordly with a shilling in your poke as with a hundred—only you choose a different field.

He would not work, to beg he was ashamed. But Sabine was not at all ashamed. ‘Let us once find the King, dear love,’ she said, ‘and we are safe.’ She did the begging, went among the spitting sailors on the mole and prayed a passage to Maintsonge. They all proffered it—until they heard of the appendage. None would take Firmin unless he would work. There was no way out. He shipped as a common sailor and found, after experience, that to work was better than to be rope’s ended. This coarsened him. He was horribly ill—it intensified the grudge he began to have against his wife. She had thrust these dangers, degradation, miseries upon him. And she lay snug abed, while he cut his hands to pieces, or clung snivelling to the shrouds.

Six months after her flight Sabine lay-in of a boy, having found the mercy of an Ursuline convent at Landeveer. To recount the thorny ways by which she got so far, dragging her load, would be an idle task, since what was to follow upon her enlargement from her haven would make them seem a light matter. Let it suffice to say that the ship they took at Coste-Salas, after battling with storms and contrary winds for two months, foundered at last in Landeveer Roads, and that she, her Firmin and another hand alone survived. They followed the coast road, begging

their way, and reached Landeveer barefooted and, as to her, at the last stretch. Her hour was come when she knew that her will must give way to her body's need. Firmin got her into the Ursulines' and there she lay, white and burning, until the Lord had mercy upon her, and—delivery indeed!—her pains were drowned at last in mere physical ease, and then in that joy of possession which is like no other on earth. At that time, also, when her lover's love for the poor girl was suffering a flicker of revival—as that of the worst of men will for some ten days—at that time also Firmin received a warning of what was threatening him; and from that time her bitter griefs began. The Earl of Pikpoyntz had a long arm.

Firmin was lounging in the sundown by the little port (which the mouth of the Hoe River forms)—the mid-October gales had given way to October's peaceful death—when he was aware of a foreign sailor, a bronzed, ear-ringed, sly-eyed fellow, lounging too, but very disposed to be friendly. The fellow spoke, moved his seat nearer, edged his person as he plied his talk, and at last got up and sat plump by Firmin. Out of his vest he pulls a script, tagged and sealed in red. ‘D’ye see this, comrade?’ says he. ‘Read it.’ He thrust it over. ‘Nay, nay,’ says Firmin, ‘I am no scholar.’ ‘Nay, but look it over,’ the man persisted; ‘look it over. It has taken me five score miles by land; it ’ud take me thrice five score, I do believe. Look you, the seal to it.’ As he proffered it again he peered in his new friend’s face. Firmin felt his breath, and guessed at the

whites of his eyes. The sight of the seal set the blood leaping in his head, singing and surging in his ears. He could not keep it still in his hand. It showed a burning mountain in a river and a motto, which, though he could not read it, he knew well. ‘Through.’ It was the signet of his liege lord, Gernulf de Salas, Earl of Pikpoyntz.

‘Ah, Saviour Christ!’ he gasped, ‘where did you get that?’ The man laughed and thrust it back into his frock, looking cunningly at Firmin all the while. ‘You look peakish, comrade. Come, we’ll find some liquor to set you on your pins.’ Strong waters brought his colour back, and his senses. He fenced with the sailor; they finished the day together and parted drunk, tearfully affectionate. But next morning Firmin’s dread lay beside him on the straw, and thence-forward left him only when he could be drunk. Drunk, he was quarrelsome with the foreign sailor; sober, he slunk out of his way, agonising over what he might have confided; but drunk or sober, by some miracle of discretion, he never betrayed Sabine. She, poor soul, wondering over her baby, herself a soft-cheeked child again, scarcely noticed the change in him, being so full of her peace—until the day came and he with it. He appeared at her bedside, and shortly told her to be ready at dawn for a journey.

‘So soon, Firmin?’ she faltered.

‘Never too soon, mistress,’ said he, and left her.

That melancholy land of dun marshes and reeds
lay laggard to the morn, when the fated pair

slipped out of the West Port. They were not, apparently, pursued ; but the sailor had reported them to his mistress, and so Blanchmains was enabled to write a letter to Speir. For many a month they crouched among the marshes, begging crusts from shepherds and bargemen, not daring to approach any town. This misery completed what fear had begun. There is none so devastating as that which hangs, but never falls. Firmin had no staying power ; his breeding, such as it had been, slipped off him with his sleek looks, and with them also went his courage. Haggard, hard-bearded, gaunt-eyed, he drank what he could get to win a make-believe. His fear paralysed him. He would not work, he refused point-blank to go down to Maintsonge and the King. He fell ill and Sabine nursed him ; then she fell ill and he let her lie in a shepherd's hut. In mid-winter the baby died ; but another was to be looked for. You might trust him for that. Finally Blanchmains got wind of them again. In March, a year after the flight, they were heard of in Hammerith, a thriving town of ships and fishing fleets on the coast, not two hundred miles from Coldscaur. Mabilla at this time was a three months' bride, paling for action. But Pikpoyntz kept her close behind the inviolate mountains which bordered his hold. Not a breath of news was suffered from Marvilion—at least, not to her ears, and all the comfort Blanchmains could get was the ‘hunt, hunt, hunt !’ she had had before.

CHAPTER II

TESTIMONY OF THE ROAD

FROM what she heard of them then Blanchmains made her plans. Firmin was sodden with misery, haunted by his fear of the Earl, disintegrate. Blanchmains judged him open to assault on the luxurious side. ‘The fine youth will be weary of his mistress,’ she thought. ‘He will have beaten the bloom off her, bruised and used her. I should give him another.’ So she judged, and sent for Broadfoot Moll from Cap Dieu. In August—some eighteen months after her flight—Sabine brought a second child into the world, and was desperately ill over the business, so that when Broadfoot Moll, a blowsy, handsome trollop, reached Hammerith she had no difficulty in finding Firmin, but could learn nothing of the much more important wife of Firmin. The youth himself was too drunk to tell her. She found him distilling alcoholic juices in a wine shop, and at first thought that his beery lamentations over his ‘dear wife’ pointed to the fact that she was dead. Broadfoot Moll herself was all for beer as your only consoler when affairs baffle you. She had money, believed

she could get more: therefore she stayed where she was, by Firmin's side, and drank her whack while carefully reducing his. In time she got him back to a state bordering on coherence, which taught her better than to believe her affair so simple. Firmin, it seemed, was again a father, by no means averse to the part and disposed to congratulate himself as upon an achievement. The child was again a boy, and both were doing well. The fact and the fancies it involved suggested innuendoes to Broadfoot Moll very much after her manner. She was a strapping black-eyed gipsy rogue whose conversation did not depend upon speech alone.

It was not difficult, accordingly, for her to play the part assigned by her mistress. Firmin was at her feet in a fortnight; she held him on tenter-hooks for another week before she confessed herself his. From the hour of that avowal, wrung from her amid scrambled kisses and screams, it is more truthful to say that he was hers. Sabine and her little Blaise—alas! a Blaise too surely to die not in a Coldscaur bed—existed no more. Firmin knew all the joys of undisputed possession for a time. Then there came in a third to make the time race by in fever snatches. Broadfoot Moll had not ramped through her world without scattering pledges. The discreditable third occupied them till the time when birds pack for flight. Sabine still lay in hospital and still moaned in her sleep when the precious pair lurched out of Hammerith with a party of shouting sailors and a blind fiddler one afternoon, and were never seen in that town

again. When the faithful little wife shivered out of the convent gate, hugging her treasure in a cloak which the good nuns had given her, she went straight as a die to the tavern on the quay, where she should have found her lord. She found instead a beady-eyed landlady, who put her from the door without ceremony, and it was only from a loafer in the street that she learned her plight. She found herself saddled with a sucking child, whose sturdy weight already dragged her shoulders together, without a sixpence, with all the shameful truth pealing in her ears into the bargain.

What she did is so characteristic of that Renny of Rennys that I must ask your admiration of it as a point of honour (however distorted) punctiliously performed. She heard the story to the end — her informant spared nothing — without flinching. I do not think she paled perceptibly ; her colour was naturally high, and not even her accouchement had been able to wear it from her. Not a wink of her serious eyes, nor a catch of the breath, let out either her despair or her shameful consciousness of the man's nods, winks, and nudges. She heard him steadily to the end, then lifted her little head high above her baby and looked full at the sly, shabby rascal before her. 'Thank you,' she said. 'I am much in your debt. My husband's affairs have called him way. I am able to follow him now. Good morning.'

Ridiculous royal little lady, who gulled not even thelickerous tramp by the tavern wall—gave him, indeed, a tale to earn his entrance—but

did so far gull yourself that you whipped a spirit in to take you alone your way of sorrows ! I read in you all the annals of your house. Not one of your Blaises and Eudos showed a stiffer back to his friends or blanker front to his enemies. Where they did wickedly you may do foolishly—it is all of a piece. And where lust led them love leads you—it may be to the same field of torment, since love and lust alike are sown in heat and reaped in tears. But I think your acts are an expiation and believe your calm face to be a witness.

After all, it is not so easy to say whether she actually realised the dismay which should have overtaken her. Pride acts on the will with greater force than desire ; it is deeper rooted, is more at home, so to put it. The intelligence had fired that into a blaze ; you may very nearly put it that her pride prevented her admitting to her own heart that she was deserted, hideously betrayed, unloved and wholly cut adrift. And this in spite of the fact that from the hour when, alone, distrustful, doubtful, touched, she had been caught unawares by the rascal who was now skulking from her and her load, she had never wavered from the love and the trust she had given him, never doubted him for a moment, in spite of everything—his sottish, surly ways, his miserable fits of terror, his blows, his oaths, his most miserable fits of blasphemous railing at God, at her, at their unborn baby. She had chosen him out of her world for honesty ; she had reasoned with herself that his misdeeds were but the excess of that quality—at any rate, she was

his through and through. Her freshness and astonishing beauty had charmed his gross eyes from the first. He had brooded over her, possessed her in thought long before she advanced any nearer than to ordering distance of him. When she drew closer he began to play the only game he knew—shamming stupid. You know how amazingly it had succeeded. God help her, she thought she had at last found an honest fellow. Innately he was a craven who, once convinced of his luck, could take his fill of it. Thus he anticipated his marriage and was honestly cloyed a week after it. That left him nothing but his wife's future greatness to trade upon. The long arm of Pikpoyntz cut him out of that, so (as such men will who cannot fall back upon themselves) he learned to lean upon the sham self liquor calls up. Morally this was the end of him. What reached Hammerith was only the simulacrum of a tall youth. It was a cringing entry keeper, a starter at shadows, a poor shifty groper after solaces—one who must glut his body with pleasures that it may slit up the issues of the mind. He dared not think he was hunted ; he dared not believe the truth.

Only at Landeveer Port, among the roaring sailors and bold-eyed women of the stews, indeed, did he find a refuge from that dread avenger, the terrible Red Earl. Sabine, by reminding him continually of his offence, reminded him no less of his certain end, the gallows. So that not until her time came and she found a haven with the nuns did Firmin begin to take breath ; and with

breath he took to liquor and after liquor to vice. The rest was easy. Blanchmains' plan had been in a fair way to succeed if Broadfoot Moll had kept her head. Unfortunately she precipitated matters, or rather her liberal arms took too wide a sweep. Firmin was not the only admirer to whom she was brought to declare that she was his. Blind Jack, the fiddler (a too old friend), was of the party that went shouting out of the Land Gate, and when they dropped their sailors (duly drugged and robbed) and made with all speed over the East Mark border into Dunelaund, Blind Jack limped on one side of her and Firmin slouched on the other. They made a divagating way over the salt marshes of Dunelaund and were not hard to follow. Sabine came upon them after ten days' travel (much of it in a canal boat, by which she cut into them at an angle) in Dunfleet marshes, not far from that little fishing town where they had been a year before and where her great ancestor, Eudo the Wolf, had been slain five hundred years yet earlier.

The fog wisps were trailing off the flat grey lands on the November morning which brought Sabine up with her runaway. By the side of the white road—between it and the dyke—the three tramps huddled, two of them blinking at the chill dawn. Firmin was lying on one elbow, gnawing alternately a knuckle bone and a hunch of rye bread. That dusty heap of drab covered with a shawl was Broadfoot Moll, dead asleep. Blind Jack the fiddler was perched chirrupping upon a milestone. He was a small, peering, flinching man

whose eyes had been put out for some devilry or other. In his cups he was quarrelsome, but just now, when his companions were dejected, he was full of quips. He held his head high like all his afflicted tribe, and trusted much to his nose. A pan of water was by his side, smoking on a little fire of dry chips ; in it from time to time he dropped an onion, a piece of bacon, or a crust. He whistled and blew on his fingers in the intervals, or flacked his leg to blow the white dust out of his breeches.

‘Eh, eh !’ said he, after a time, stopping to snuff the air. ‘I smell a stranger on the road —a stranger, Firmin, my Trojan. You would not like strangers. How if it should be a friend ?’ He snuffed again.

Firmin glanced up, but soon returned to his bone. The distant figure drew nearer.

‘Tis a woman, boy,’ pursued Blind Jack, after nosing the scent out ; ‘tis a slippering, shuffling young woman with a load. A babby, for a guess. A girl with a babby, my brave ! Does that set your wits to work, eh ?’

It did. Firmin glared at him, then looked at the figure. He dropped his bone. ‘Saints alive ! I’m dogged, Jack,’ he said.

The fiddler flipped his fingers and crowed. ‘Eh, eh ! Dogged like a sneaking fox, singled like Master Brock by a terrier cur ’ ; he jeered and mocked till Firmin turned on him, white and savage. ‘God twist your tongue, ye blind thief !’ The other paid no heed, but snatched up his fiddle and twanged a string or two. Then he began to sing in a canting voice :—

Little mistress, little lady,
Come and love me where it's shady
And the birds sing roundelay—

Firmin grabbed at his neck. ‘Jack, ye little devil, Jack, if ye don’t stop I’ll slip a knife in your ribs. ’Tis my mistress coming, sure as the grave.’ The blind man shrilled with laughter which was not all merriment.

‘Ho, boy ! Ho, boy ! ’Tis so, ’tis so. Then perhaps ye’ll leave smelling after mine. Sporting rights are sporting rights, by Mary the Virgin ! You keep your missy and I’ll keep to mine.’

Firmin could not now keep his eyes off Sabine. ‘Jack,’ he said hoarsely, ‘Jack ! Can she set the law upon me, d’ye think ?’

Jack spat on the ground. ‘If I cud spew ye out like that, ye white leper, I’d do it. You’ve got a heart made o’ mud, ye have. Call yourself a man, ye jelly-blooded mongrel ! Bah, I sicken at ye ! Go and ask her pardon, ye backdoor, pilfering, whining, lying tom cat. Go and grovel and look at the brat you’ve got on her. Maybe ye’ll not have another chance before the gallows gets ye ! Off with ye now, for a dirty-fingered, lickpot sneak, or I’ll break the fiddle over the shoulders of ye !’ The stout little man fairly drove his mate out into the road. Broadfoot Moll, awake now, yawning and rubbing her sleepy brown eyes, grinned her admiration. ‘Oh, Jack, Jack,’ she said softly, ‘what a little captain ye are ! You’re the man I love, Jack, for all your dead eyes. Come and kiss me, Jack.’ The fiddler was prompt.

‘ ‘Tis his mistress come after him, Moll. The shaking hound slipt off after ye and left her behind him in Landeveer Port, and her new-born babby in her shawl. Oh, Moll, Moll, how could ye have the heart to do it? You’ve been false to me before now, Christ help ye, and he’s a false one through to his back—but she was an honest girl, Moll, once, before he gulled her. And now you gull him !’

Broadfoot Moll hid her face on the fiddler’s shoulder.

‘ Don’t reproach me, Jack,’ she sobbed, ‘ don’t reproach me. I’m too easy with men, and that’s the truth. I can’t say no, Jack.’

‘ No, ye can’t, ye handsome slut, and that’s the Testament truth of it.’ He kissed her again with a sigh and went back to stir his broth. Broadfoot Moll put up her tousled hair and fastened the body of her dress with a couple of pins, watching all the while, with a good deal of interest, the greeting of Firmin with his wife and child. This was the girl she was sent after by her employer. She knew little of the why or who in the business, but guessed a good deal.

She saw the meeting, such as it was. Firmin had shuffled into the middle of the road, and there stood with his hands deep in his breeches pockets awaiting Sabine. The girl came gently, almost timidly to him, put her face up to be kissed, made no reproaches, but with shining eyes of pride and a face all rosy and soft, looked down as she opened her shawl. ‘ Oh, Firmin, look what I have brought you,’ she said shyly. ‘ The nuns had him christened. He is Blaise, Firmin.

Is he not splendid ?' Firmin blinked at his son, then of his own accord he kissed his wife, and they turned and came back together to the two by the dyke. Broadfoot Moll was on her best behaviour. In terms of her reconciliation with her Jack she had slipt her silver ring on the proper finger ; face to face with an undoubted wife (as she believed her) and an almost certain lady born she could be no less than the virtuous woman. To Sabine she was deferential and full of tact ; she called her 'Mistress Firmin,' adored the baby from a distance, was determined to atone for past misdeeds by vigilant strategy now.

She shivered when she thought of Blanchmains' keen and quiet face under the news of her late escapade. Sabine met her advances with her usual quiet acceptance of everything, friendly or adverse. She gave you the air of a princess in hiding who recognises that for a time she must abrogate her prerogatives. She never unbent entirely, but she did not keep aloof ; she dipped her fingers into Jack's pipkin and fished for an onion or rag of bacon with the others, and when it came to her baby boy's turn she gave him his breakfast with the innocent unconcern of the Madonna. Blind Jack bowed, scraped, and skipped, all nerves and alacrity. He sniffed all about her like a spaniel at a hare's form. 'Ahi !' he cried, whistling his words. 'Any one can see what you are—a ladyship born ! Any one can see it—ah !' cried the poor fellow with a moan, 'except me, merciful Lord ; except me !' He beat his forehead in his despair ; yet he had seen her as she was best of all the three.

Broadfoot Moll tuned herself to the wit of the shabby little crew of them. She frankly admitted that the fiddler had only voiced her own suspicions. ‘If I slip out “my dear” now and then where a madam would come better and a ladyship do no harm ye’ll forgive me, my dear, for the sake of the little gentleman you nurse,’ she said. ‘We all have our ups and downs, and mine are downs, my heart, as my husband’ll tell ye if ye ask him. But though I be soused in the Pit for the sins o’ men I should know a high lady when I saw her—an’ there might be some in my company there if there’s a God to rule the day. So if I greet ye fair and serve ye honest, my dear, ye’ll put up with the sliding tongue in me and say, “’Tis the tender heart of the wench!”’ ‘Oh yes,’ said Sabine, ‘you shall call me what you will. We are all unfortunate together. I think you are very kind to me.’ Moll’s foolish eyes were filled with tears, and tears choked her utterance; but she snatched up Sabine’s hand to kiss. Blind Jack was delighted, insisted on his share, got and saluted Sabine’s hand as if he had been a courtier; then he turned to his mistress with a zest. Firmin had no kissing; he scowled apart.

Broadfoot Moll now turned to affairs. Where were they? Where should they go? The fiddler knew everything, blind as he was. They were now some five miles north by west of Dunfleet, twenty miles east of Beatonshoe. Beatonshoe lay in the middle of Dunelaund; his advice was that they should make for Beatonshoe—fine city, very charitable, full of convents, the centre of the

shire, where you would hear all the news for miles about. Beatonshoe happened to be one of the places where, as Moll knew, Blanchmains would have a spy. She remembered the name of the meeting-place appointed. She agreed. Firmin had nothing to say, but made it appear that where Broadfoot Moll went he would go. Sabine, when asked what she thought, for answer looked at Firmin. ‘Good, then, my dears; we’re for Beatonshoe,’ said the bouncing girl, and they were soon on the road. I pass over much misery to get them to Beatonshoe—which finally they saw in the violet haze: Beatonshoe, a city on a low hill, with a great church tower, the landmark of all that shire of marshes and reeds. They crept into a town full of soldiery—King’s men they were, too—but none molested them nor took any heed. They were so many more to the drab tale of camp-followers. Moll, Sabine and the child got a shelter in a house of Poor Clares; the two men herded where they could in the entries and gateways of the wind-swept streets. There was nothing to hold them together. The moment they had left their women the fiddler went one way and Firmin another. But Firmin was never very far from the Clares’ gate. He was thus enabled to see Moll creep out after dark and to follow her to the tavern of ‘The Holy Ghost,’ a not too reputable haunt of the dregs of Beatonshoe. The King’s soldiers pervaded the streets, but Moll had no eyes for soldiers just then. Nor had she, as he was to find out, an eye for Firmin.

CHAPTER III

THE TAVERN OF 'THE HOLY GHOST'

THAT night at Beatonshoe was dark and squally with a hot south-west wind—too hot for the end of November. Firmin sweated freely as he squeezed among the jostling crowds of Three Kings Street, partly by effort to overtake his woman, partly by the strain upon him to know where she was. The only light there was came from the few guttering lamps outside the houses or before the image of some saint or another. The streets were narrow and filled from side to side : the soldiers were in the town—all the town came out to see them. Firmin, in a perfect fever of jealous anxiety, hunted for Broadfoot Moll. By the flare from an open tavern door he saw her, discreetly (but, alas ! provocatively) shawled. He saw her stopped by four arquebusiers abreast, of whom one coolly drew open the fold of her cloak to look at her. Firmin, breathless, gained on her by this delay. He was amazed to see her entreating them to let her pass ‘for the sake of the Virgin.’ He saw her appeal to a shrined image in the wall above her where that holy lady held

out her Son, and a little floating wick showed the dust on the faded wreaths hanging there. He saw the prayer prevail. The men let her on and reeled into the already packed wine shop. When at last he saw her turn out of Three Kings Street into one smaller and darker he sighed his thanks to Heaven, knowing that he had her now. In and out of the small creaks of light he made after her.

Once he saw her stop just beyond one such stream, evidently that she might see who was following her without herself being seen. Firmin accordingly pulled up just short of it. They both waited, looking at each other's dark envelope. By this time Firmin knew that she was going upon some secret business of her own. He had got so besotted upon the woman that it never entered his head this could be anything but unfaithfulness to him. His passion for her was, of course, perverted appetite—wholly a matter of sense. He knew well enough what she had been, what she was, what she must and would be to the end of her squalid chapter ; none of this mattered. It was sense and sense only that goaded him ; let her be to outward sight and seeming his alone he could be content. Follow her now he must. He heard her at last creep on along the edge of the houses, and after a little he too went on.

She seemed to know her way perfectly. Flagrantly detected lie ! She had affected to know nothing of the place when it was under discussion. He raged and swore under his breath ; then he began to wonder whither he was being

led. He felt himself—ah, he had his knife ! It should be for her or any one else whom she let touch her this night—that also he swore to. Then he saw his chance. Moll stooped to pick a stone out of her shoe. Firmin sprang forward and had her by the shoulders. As she raised herself with a gasp of fear he turned her round and caught her in his arms.

‘Moll, my Moll ! my pretty delight !’ the doting fool began, mumbling at her cheeks.

It was now Broadfoot Moll’s turn to swear. ‘Let me go, you greedy villain !’ she panted, struggling to free herself. ‘By the Lord, my Saviour, Firmin, if you hold on to me I’ll slice you for it. Let me go, let me go, or I’ll raise the watch !’

Firmin dropped her at this. They faced each other, out of breath and temper and measure alike.

‘Tell me where you’re going, Moll,’ he said in his throat. She shook a hand in his face.

‘I’ll tell you where you’re going, my man, and that’s to hell this very night, if you come near me again. I’m tired of this, you sick dog, you ! Get back to your wife and child and leave me my way.’

‘It’s you I want, Moll, Lord help me !’ he began to blubber. ‘If you throw me off now, after what’s been between us this long time, I won’t answer for me or you. That’s a holy truth, Moll. I care for nothing in the world but you. I’m a beggar, and a sodden beggar at that ; I’ll go to hell, but I’ll take you with me. It’s you I want—you, you, you !’

The passion in the fellow set him screaming at her. She saw that she must go on another beat. She came near him, therefore, holding out her two hands to be taken in his. ‘There, there, lad,’ she said, ‘don’t take on that gait. Why, you must be crazy to be set on Gypsy Moll—anybody’s money. Let me go; I’m not worth the love of even you, lad.’ But the look she caught in the burning eyes of him showed her words’ emptiness. She was pretty hardy, yet she had to lower her own before it.

‘Moll,’ he whispered, ‘listen to this. I loved my mistress once, but it was nothing to this. It eats me up; I’ve neither rest nor peace. You can make me hate myself, but not leave of wanting you. Now look at this. Tell me where you are going and what to do, and I swear by the Sacred Name I’ll not follow you farther than the door you enter. I’ll not, indeed. Are you going to be untrue to me by your errand?’

‘No. That I swear.’

‘Are you going to meet a man?’

‘It may be a man. I don’t know.’

‘Who is the man?’

‘How can I tell you when I don’t know whether ’tis a man or not?’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To the sign of “The Holy Ghost.”’

‘A beer-shop?’

‘Sort of that.’

‘You have sworn, Moll?’

‘I’ll swear again if you like that I’m for no dishonesty—ah,’ she gasped and swallowed, then

went on—‘none of that sort at least. I shall be a clean woman this night, Firmin.’

‘Kiss me, Moll, and I’ll let you go.’

‘There, there—quick !’

He strained her to him and then pushed her away. ‘By the Mass, I love till I hate, I do believe,’ he groaned. ‘Now go on. I’ll stay for you at the door.’

There was no help for it ; she had to leave it so.

The tavern of ‘The Holy Ghost’ was really a vault under the church of that name. It had no windows, but a plain door painted green and rubbed black by many a discreditable palm. Above this hung an oil lamp and a gilt dove for sign. The street was as dark as all of its class ; there were no loafers by the green door. Men and sometimes a woman or two went in ; no one seemed to come out. There was no noise. Towering above them rose the thicker blackness which declared the great Holy Ghost Church served by the Poor Men of God.

Moll stopped her companion at the church porch, a deep hiding-place. ‘Stay you here, Firmin. I shall not be long.’

‘I’ll wait. Remember.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Moll crept on and pushed open the green door. A broad beam of light covered her for a moment ; then all was dark again.

Firmin’s very first act was a lie. He did not wait in the porch, but went to the green door and crouched himself there. He could not keep quiet, so fell to biting his nails. The time sped

on at the racing speed of his thoughts, if thoughts they can be called which stormed like clouds across his brain. One or two belated revellers, three soldiers with a woman, all reeling ; two women who went furtively, started at the brunt of his shadow and then tried to brave him with a blasphemy ; a few others, habitués. Later than all these came to his ear the tap of a stick on the cobbles which he had learned to loathe, the quick chasing sniffs which he had reason to fear—Blind Jack going his rounds. Firmin slunk into the farthest corner and waited, pale and nervous. The fiddler came on the line of his tapping stick, found the balustrade, the steps, by its help. He nosed desperately all about him, to Firmin's terror, but apparently the fumes of cider and beer blotted all other smells. After a little hesitation he went down the steps and pushed himself through the green door. The door closed on him, but not before Firmin had heard the roar of welcome. There were harsh women's voices in it, which set him shaking again. Almost immediately afterward he heard the stamp of Jack's foot and the scraping of his fiddle. Craning his ear to the door, he heard them pushing the trestle tables and benches out of the way. They were going to dance. Very soon he knew that they were dancing, from which time all sense of measure, caution, or desire left him.

He was at the mercy of a roaring blaze—a red rage. It was in the stress of that that a new desire, that of killing, came to him and never left him till it was done. That once become an intent,

he grew calmer, preternaturally wise and deliberate. He took out his knife, honed it on the step, gave it an edge on his boot. Then he turned it up his sleeve, pulled his hat down upon his eyes, and pushed open the great door.

The room he saw was very long and was vaulted. Obviously it had been part of the crypt of the church. The corners were dark, for there was but one lamp—a huge flaring oil thing hung upon a chain in the middle of the room. Jack the fiddler sat high on a table, playing his maddest; a mug of liquor was by his foot, but though he looked to have need of it the froth was yet on it. Below him a room full of panting rascals whirled and capered or chased each other in and out of the pack. It was neither a sane nor a shameful sight—merely gross. For Firmin it was nothing but so much cover for his game. He looked about for Broadfoot Moll, guessing from what he knew of her that one of the alcoves would hold her. At last he caught sight of her in the arms of a gigantic halberdier, half dead with exertion, a flushed, disorderly Venus, the spoil of a beery Mars. Fiercely as he hated her for thus putting the crown to his temple of hatred, he could not but hold back a moment before he went to mar this piece of work. The exuberant charms of the woman were enough to shake a stronger man. It was because he felt himself so weak before her that he went on. As she lay, half swooning with drink, fatigue and love, in her soldier's arms, Firmin marked exactly where she was—namely, against a buttress, the second on the left beyond

the lamp. She would never see him ; he had no fear of any other. He pushed open the door and slipped in among the frantic dancers. Elbowing his way between them, he reached the centre of the vault ; there he stood under the lamp, unnoticed of any of the throng.

He was, as you know, pretty tall ; he ascertained by reaching up his arm that with a jump he could touch the wick of the light. At a moment chosen for him, as it seemed, by blind Jack ; at a stamp from him, a flourish and a shriek from the fiddle, Firmin took off his cap, made his jump and extinguished the light. Screams and stifled laughter, scrambling, kissing and chasing drowned his next move.

Broadfoot Moll's voice, drowsy with love, guided him now. He stumbled forward over prostrate forms, battled among men and women fighting, elbowing and hugging, toward the sleepy voice which said : ‘But I do love ye, sweetheart, I do, I do.’ He knew her very breath as he stood before her in the dark. He felt her breast with his hand ; then he stabbed below it, stabbed deep, turned and fled for the door. He heard her wet sob—then her ‘Oh, Tom, Tom, I’m stabbed. Love me, Tom. I’m dying’ ; then the thud of her body on the floor and the hoarse cry of her lover. He heard no more, gained the street, and fled like the wind away. Broadfoot Moll had died in harness, poor soul !

Blind Jack’s high voice rose wailing above the uproar—‘There’s been bloody work among ye ; I heard her fall ! Who’s done it ? Where’s my

splendid girl? Where's my Moll?' He alone of the panic-struck herd could find his way. He knelt down and felt the woman's face—'Ah, 'tis my girl they've hit. 'Tis my pretty lass!' he whispered with a break in his dry voice. He felt over her body and shuddered at the mess. 'Wet, pah!' Then he threw himself upon her and whispered between his kisses—'O my dear, my dear! Are ye going, Molly? Will ye leave me, dear?' and such-like babble. The dying girl moaned out the truth.

'Love ruined me, I ruined you, and now I've done wi' love, Jack.'

'Who done it on ye, Moll? Who done it? Tell me that before ye go.'

'Firmin did it, Jack. I might 'a known he would.'

'Ah, the gallows rat—he shall answer for it.'

'Stick him for me, Jack.'

'I'll spoil him slower nor that, Molly. He shall madden first.'

'Take the girl to—ah, I'm done! Take her with ye, Jack!'

'His girl, Molly? And the baby?'

'Yes, yes. Ah, Mother of God! Kiss me, Jack.'

'Eh, my pretty one! Eh, my pretty dove!'

He rose up. The relit room saw then his sightless agony, dry as an east wind. He solemnly cursed his enemy. 'May these hands rot if they feel not that dog's neck before day dawning! May hell burn me if it burn not him first! Make way there; I'm going to do my work in the open.' Through a lane of them he went

to the tune of his stick. No one stopped him. Some good soul laid a crucifix on the woman's breast, folded her hands, shut down her eyes, threw a sheet over her. They did a great trade at the tavern of 'The Holy Ghost' that night.

Sabine was sleeping on the floor of the Clares hospice. She was roused by a touch upon her shoulder.

'My child,' said the portress, 'a man naming himself your husband waits for you at the gate. He says you must take the road with him upon the instant.'

'Good, my sister ; I will come.'

'It is midnight, my child. A blowy and rainy night. Can you not wait ?'

'No, sister ; I must go if he needs me.'

'Must it be so ? Will you take some bread with you ?'

'I would like that. Thank you, sister.'

'Come with me, then. I will give it you at the gate.'

'Yes, I am quite ready.'

'Ah, child, you need not trouble about your tread. These poor souls will not wake for that.'

So they went together. The white face of Firmin was at the gate.

'Come, come, for the love of God !' he whispered. 'I must be out of this.'

'I am quite ready, Firmin. Good-night, my sister.'

'Good-night, dear child. May Our Blessed Lord have you in His care, and Our Lady and all saints !'

'Thank you, thank you, sister. Pray for us. Good-night.'

'Come, come, come,' urged Firmin, looking scared. They hurried on toward the Morton gate.

When they approached it they found it shut.

'Who are you? Where are you for? Whence?' said the sentry.

'Name of Firmin; for Morton Wold; from the Clares' hostel.'

'Got your pass?'

'From the sisters? Yes. Here,' said Sabine.

The man read it by the light of his lantern. Nosing in the dark, Blind Jack waited and thrilled.

'Pass on,' said the sentry as he opened the gate.

'What! Three of you?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Sabine.

'Saints, Sabine, who's the third?' Firmin sweated with fright.

'Oh, Firmin, our little Blaise!'

Firmin swore for his relief. Then they went forward against the rising wind. The rain drove in their faces, and Sabine closed her shawl round her little Blaise.

Blind Jack sat himself down on a heap of stones.

'He shall hear the music o' my little stick above the wind,' he said to himself, 'when he's gone his quarter of a mile.' He sat the time out, winking and nodding to himself. If it had been light you might have seen his raised brows and expostulating smile, as if he were arguing a *reductio ad absurdum*.

CHAPTER IV

MORTON DYKE

WHEN they got down the little hill upon which stood the city, away from the clustered hovels, wine-shops, beer-shops, guest-houses, etc., which always collect at the gates, it was not until they were fairly on the plain that they felt the full force of the wind. It came swooping across those dreary flats, strong, steady and hot, bringing with it the rain. It was pitchy dark, but the way could not be missed ; there was but one to go—the Roman road, the road of the West, which ran straight for Morton Wold, some sixty miles, before it split into three, respectively for Bréault, Cragarn, Minster Merrow. For Firmin the fugitive, therefore, it was a case for speed. The marshes were cut off from him by broad black dykes ; there was simply no more cover than the screaming reeds could spare him. He knew this as well as anybody, and pushed on with all the strength fear could lend him.

At the end of a mile or so the pace told upon Sabine, burdened as she was. She began to flag ; a cry for stay was twisted from her. ‘Ah, Firmin,

I cannot go so fast!' He was ahead of her, but shame made him stop; the night hid his cursing face. 'For God's sake, push, can't you?' he shouted down the wind. While he waited for her a faint sound caught his ear—faint, very far off. His heart jumped enough to take his breath away. He caught Sabine by the arm. 'Hark! Listen, listen! What is that sound?'

She listened painfully. 'There is nothing, Firmin. Why are you so terrified?'

'Hush! Listen again. I swear I heard something.'

They both stood still; a sudden grip of his hand made the girl cry out. 'Oh, Firmin, you are hurting me!'

'There it is! There it is!' he whispered. 'Hark! Do you hear it now?'

She did. 'Why, it sounds like the blind man's stick.'

Firmin gave a cry. She accepted the augury.

'Dearest,' she pleaded, 'dearest, may we not travel alone again? I think we are happier together—we three. Let us go on. You do not want to wait for them, Firmin?'

'Ah, God!' he groaned, and shuddered. 'No, no, no! Let us run, Sabine—let us run. Give me the baby.'

'No, no; I will carry him. He is quite quiet. He knows me. Come.'

They started at a trot and so struggled for another mile. Then Sabine had to give in, to Firmin's unconcealed agony.

'For the Lord's sake, come!'

'Firmin, I cannot. I will stay here. You go on, and I will join you at the first village we pass. Wait for me there.'

Firmin did not stay to talk. He was gone before her words were done. Sabine, dropping with fatigue, fell at the side of the road. Half an hour later she woke with a start. Tap—tap—tap sounded close by. Blind Jack came slipping along after his stick, muttering to himself. 'Now, my heart, now, my pretty lass! Now be cheery!' She could see nothing. It seemed as if he was talking to his wench, and so, no doubt, he was. The taps faded from her as the fiddler went on and she sank asleep again. Meanwhile Firmin was flying for his life.

He trotted for a couple of miles and then brought up gasping. He leaned his hands on his knees and sobbed to get his breath. His head spun. Then he heard the fatal tapping again upon his track. This set the doomed wretch staggering another mile. He rested there, because he needs must. On he went again at the touch of his goad ; it came to resting every half mile ; every quarter. The stick gained upon him ; soon he could hear it as he shambled. He had a panic, rushed for the reeds on his right ; there were none—they had been cut. On his left there were a few. Trying for them, he missed his footing and soused one leg into the mud up to the knee. This was quite enough to make his brain blind. He gave a hoarse cry, clutched frantically about, splashed, gasped. The tapping stick ceased. Blind Jack had heard him. When

it began again—not hastened in the least, but steady as a clock—Firmin had gained the bank and was limping the road again. The clog of mud and water on his left leg hindered him terribly—now he knew that he was running a losing race. He began to fail at the knees, actually dropped—once, twice. The second time he could hear the blind man's eager sniffing as he nosed out the scent. By his next frantic act he lost himself, for he gave a shrill cry and plunged off to the left. He took, indeed, to the water. As he clung half in, half out, the stick which had seemed latterly to deafen him became muffled. It was almost a relief—physically, was actual ease—but he knew that his foe was on the grass. It is probable that his little remaining sense froze in his head at this point. What awoke him was the grip of a hand upon his hair.

‘Ahi, ahi! It is well met, dear friend,’ said the wheezy voice of Blind Jack.

‘Mercy, mercy—my wife and child!’ This was hardly audible, but Blind Jack caught it up.

‘Eh, the wife and child of him! So loved and tended—eh, eh, eh!’

‘Mercy, mercy——’

‘And I’m goin’ to be merciful, for I’m goin’ back for ‘em. Three mile ago I past ‘em if sound and smell can tell me anything. And they’re all I’ve got, merciful Lord, to go by, except a hand in a dog’s pelt, merciful Lord, and a gaudy strong wrist.’ He gave a shake to his victim.

‘Now, you hearken to me, you white-galled

hound,' he said. "'Tis a sinner speaks to the dirt at his feet. You're no sinner, my man, having no guts—you're just a clod of muck, you are—carrion and muck that the crows would turn at. An' you've fouled all you come near—and by the living witness of the holy bread you'll foul no more. Muck ye are, Firmin, an' I'm goin' to drown you in muck. If the water'll have him, merciful Lord !'

'My wife—ah, my child——' But his executioner gave him a shake. 'Gr-r-r—you sick dog—souse, will ye !'

He pushed him deep, his arm stiffened and held like a bar of metal. His work over, he got up and wiped the sweat from his face. "'Tis a work well done,' said he to himself. 'Now what comes next ?'

He meditated. Then he perked up his head and sniffed. His quick ear had caught something on the road. 'Some one coming into town,' said he, 'an' I'm not in the mood for strangers. Wait now, wait now, till I see. 'Tis a man, a young man, an' a quick-hearted young man. He's got something to take him into town. A woman, merciful Lord ! Hark ye, now. By the heavens, he's singing. His heart's on fire for love of a lady. Well, he'll never hurt me ! He's for ladies, not for dead dogs and their slayers.'

He rose up on one knee, still listening. Then he gave a jump, slapped his thigh, sprang to his feet. 'Yonder'll be a heart full of mercy an' pity. He'll do my business. I'll board him, by

the Mass !' Jack began to whistle. He was quite himself again—all rage had gone into the black mud round Firmin's neck. A light, springing step came down the wind nearer and nearer.

'Ho-ho, ahoy !' the fiddler called. The step ceased.

'Who goes there ?'

'A friend, and a blind one at that.'

'Good. Where are you, blind friend ?'

'Ten paces to your right.'

The step began again slowly. The fiddler struck the road with his stick. 'Here you are,' he said. 'No offence, friend, if I use my feelers ?'

'Feel away, my man.'

Blind Jack felt the stranger over face, breast, and thighs, muttering comments as he went.

'H'm, h'm—smooth as a girl—man's shoulders — man's breast — velvet tunic, by the Lord ! Dagger ? That's your sort for the road. Man's pair of legs. Man it is ! You're none too old for the road, master ?'

'No. I'm not very old yet. What do you want ?'

'I might want your name, friend.'

'I keep that for older friends.'

'Quite right, quite right, master. Now, have ye any mercy in your heart, or is it all blocked up wi' love and charity ?'

'I hope I am merciful.'

'Then mercy you shall do. Three miles along this road, on your left as you go, you'll come

upon a girl an' a babby. Now a man's been drowned here, the father o' that babby. You go up to that young woman and you say, "Sabine, my dear," says you, "your man's fell into the dyke and got drowned. Now you come along o' me," says you, "an' I'll never leave ye!" That's what you'll say.'

'My good friend, I shall say nothing of the sort, I assure you. To begin with, it would be the speech of a brute.'

'Oh, wrap it how you will,' said the fiddler—'put it up in a bit of your velvet. It'll have to come out in the end, ye know.'

'——Next,' went on the stranger, 'it would be a lie, for there is no probability of my remaining with the young woman and her baby. It is not my baby.'

'Right, right, young master. Take her where ye like, but never leave her at the side of the road with a drowned husband handy.'

'Is he handy?'

'Well, in truth he is none too handy. The black mud's got him, or the black eels. She'll never see him again and that's as sure as hell, an' a vasty deal better for her.'

'What will she do, then?'

'Eh, eh, that's for you to settle,' said the blind man cheerfully. The other laughed.

'You are a cool hand, my friend,' said he.

'I'm dead blind,' said Jack. The other started and covered his eyes.

'Ah, pitiful, pitiful! Forgive me. I had forgotten. Yes, then I will look after them. I will

get them into a convent till I can arrange something else.'

Blind Jack took his hand. 'You're a fine young fellow,' he said. 'Now I'll tell you something else. Don't take her into Beatonshoe. Take her North.'

'Why North?'

'I cannot tell you anything—save this. She's a North Marvilion gal.'

'How do you know?'

'I've heard her speak of the shire, and one I knew better than her—God rest her, she died this blessed night!—she came from those parts—out o' the city of Cap-Dieu. For there I loved her when I had my eyes—and there I lost my eyes and she her soul—merciful Lord!'

'Well, I am for the North myself,' said the stranger. 'I am going to the Honeybornes.'

'Ah,' sniffed Jack, 'and which of 'em?'

'Honeyborne Cuthbert, I think.'

'You'll be in good company, young man. There is a prince o' the blood royal in that little town.'

'So I believe. Well, I will go now. Three miles, you say?'

'Matter o' three. Mind ye, ye'll be doin' the Lord's work.'

'I hope so, I hope so. Good-night.'

'Good-night to ye, lad.'

They struck off in opposite ways.

A faint grey light was struggling against the rain when the seeker and the sought met each other. The seeker saw a muffled figure dragging

on the road, the sought-for stopped doubtfully at sight of him and waited. The seeker came up to her, taking off his cap. ‘I think I am sent to look for you,’ he said.

‘I am looking for my husband, sir,’ she replied. He could not see her face, but he found her voice very patient.

‘Then it is you I am sent to find, madam. Let us sit down on these stones.’ Wondering, she followed him. They sat down, and Sabine rocked her baby.

‘Madam, I cannot see your face, but by your voice I judge you to be a Christian and gently born.’

‘I am both of these, sir.’

‘Have you ever thought, madam, that we can be neither of these things without payment?’

‘I know it very well,’ said Sabine, beginning to tremble.

‘We never know the full price. Much has been asked of you. Perhaps you have much to give. If so, much may still be required. Did you love your husband?’

‘O sir ! O sir !’ She began to cry.

‘Ah, my poor lady, what can I say to that?’

‘He was my husband. He is dead—oh, oh, oh !’

He could hear her tears falling ; his own were not far off. The whole truth must come out.

‘I met a blind man in the dark, who stopped me and told me to find you. From him I learned what I am sure is true. When it is light we will go to make sure, if we must. But I am sure it is true, unless the man was mad. He seemed to

know you and your husband. He told me the manner of his death. I suppose he must have missed the road—there are dykes in this country. But you know that. Ah, madam, madam,' he broke out with a sob, 'believe how distressed I am !'

She could answer nothing, but must needs go on wringing her hands. He tried another tack.

'The child will look to learn of his father from you, madam,' he said. The poor girl felt the stab of the irony, innocently as it was dealt. It was rude, but it helped her. Her counsellor went on : 'The Lord who takes away also gives,' he said. 'It is no small thing to be mother of a child. And you will learn to be father too, for I know that you have a great heart.' He saw her bend down and kiss the hidden face over and over. He knew then that he had helped her.

Presently she looked up. He could just see the rings of dark which were her eyes.

'You are very kind to me,' she said. 'Who are you ?'

'My name is Lanceilhot Paulet, madam.'

'Mine is Firmin. Will you take us to——'

'Ah, will you go there ?'

'Yes, yes, I must.'

They found in the disordered turf, torn-up reeds, and crumbled banks of the dyke inferential proof. Then Sabine, with a cry, found proof positive — Firmin's green felt hat, like a dark bubble in the scum. No need to look for more of him.

When her passion of weeping was done, in the light of a wet dawn they took the road together. By the end of a couple of miles Paulet was carrying the baby in his cloak and Sabine had his staff to help her feet.

CHAPTER V

THE EYE OF PAULET

WHEN Paulet received his lady's letter he blamed himself for not having kept his eye upon Don John of Barsaunter. She by no means ceased to be his lady because she was Countess of Pikpoyntz. That was not at all the fashion of the time. Therefore Don John was still his rival; therefore his eye should have been upon Don John.

'My blessed lady writes with a light heart,' he thought, 'but I am sure she is straining her eyes. "There is like to be trouble," she says, which, from her, is assurance that there is trouble already. "For fear this miscarry"—can a letter, then, not get through? At that rate he is in force. He has not been in the West since she was here also. If, therefore, he has an army together, 'tis out of King's Hold. I should strike for the midlands if I want to find him, through Bréauté and on to Morton.'

This he did. But at Morton he lost his way and came, as you have seen, little short of Beatonshoe in his endeavours to reach Honeyborne. He had had a fair road of it as far as Cleyhunger,

for both Bréauté and Marvilion are smiling, sleepy shires. There was hardly a night for him without a bed in a great house—castle or monastery—thanks to his gift of music and modest way. He made his traverse to Cleyhunger, on the borders of the marsh, in fifteen days. Then came the lean hours on the heels of the fat, through which he had to pinch as he could. A haystack for a night's lodging and a wet day to follow took the briskness out of him ; his steps flagged under the uncertainty of his going. It was then that he determined for Beatonshoe, not because he believed it in his way, for he knew it was out, but for the sake of some definite mark ahead of him. Finding at his last stage that he had fifteen miles yet to go, he shook the rain out of his eyes and trudged out into the dark. That brought him up against Sabine, changed his plans, and made his fortune. So runs our luck.

Poet irrevocably as he was, Lanceilhot was much struck with his first fair view of Sabine. It was broad daylight ; the rain had stopped. There was even a watery gleam of sun shivering over the marshes. He proposed breakfast—he had some bread and three or four apples in his wallet. She agreed, being too weak to deny him. They stopped, accordingly, by some pollarded willows, where there was also an approach to the dyke made for the use of watering cattle. Paulet took off his cloak and spread it for her to sit upon. ‘First I must wash as well as I can,’ said she. That was how he saw her.

Sabine took off her shawl, unpinned and shook

loose her hair, turned her sleeves up to the elbows, and went down to the dyke. Corbet was amazed at her beauty. He had never seen anything so calm and sad, at once so meek and so noble, out of an altar-piece. She was just such a divine child, chosen to be woman and made mother, as some Tuscan had painted for the great church at Saint Save. Grave, far-searching, heavy-lidded eyes, a mouth which seemed quivering for tears, face of pure oval framed in heavy hair—and her colouring, heaven and earth! pure and downy, glowing as a child's. He could have knelt before her and said his Ave, Virgo.

He watched her intently, every movement of her beautiful body. To himself he admitted, 'My own dear lady is not so radiant as this miraculous child.' And his heart smote him for his disloyalty till he made haste to remember that it was his Mabilla's clear humanity hearted in the god which made her all she was to him. So, Mabilla's due being paid, he could honestly admire what was before him. 'After all's said,' he thought, 'there is a likeness here between my lady and this child—one of those most subtle likenesses which lies in the chance turning of the head, or, more likely, in the half-discerned moulding of it; a thing most difficult to see—when seen, unmistakable.'

'It is nothing that they have the same short lip, the same dark hair, the same height and glorious shape—though there my blessed lady is more imperiously conqueror. But to my thinking both walk as if they not scorned, but did not heed

the earth—as if, indeed, they had been born above it and knew not what they trod. This is very singular—but perhaps not so singular as their kinship would be.'

Sabine came back at this, rosy from her bath. 'I am quite ready now,' she said, having lost, not the poignancy of her sorrow, but her lack of control; 'will you let me take my little Blaise ?'

Paulet started as if he had been stung.

'Did you call him Blaise ?'

'Yes. Blaise is his name.'

'Blaise—Firmin ?'

'Yes.'

Over their meal they discussed their plans. Sabine said that she was not decided what she should do. 'How should you have decided?' cried Lanceilhot. She sighed, conquered her tears and went on to say, 'There is little to decide. I am destitute, and my baby must live.'

'If you are destitute,' cried Paulet, 'I thank God that you met me, for I am not yet destitute. I have enough to take the two of us to Honeyborne, or even to Cap-Dieu.'

Now it was Sabine's turn to jump.

'Are you going to Cap-Dieu ?'

He almost smiled to see how his chance shot had told.

'I may find my affair at Honeyborne Cuthbert delay me. But that once done, I must go farther and should pass by Cap-Dieu. If I could serve you also I should be glad.'

Sabine thought for a little. Afterwards she

said slowly, 'I think I will go with you to Cap-Dieu.'

'Do you know it, madam?'

'Yes. I could stay there.'

She began to give her little one his breakfast, and the subject was dropped. But Paulet's curiosity was awake. He watched his companion intently, straining to find the likeness he had fancied to see. 'It may be racial,' he reflected, 'as the grey eyes and pale faces of Campflors are. Plainly she is from North Marvilion, and I suppose there are others there besides Rennys. North Marvilion is one of the largest shires in the kingdom. What beats me, however, is her baby Blaise. It is a most unusual name; indeed, I know of no others than that terrible red line of Rennys. There again, though, it is possibly local. Renny is king of the shire. His name would be spread all over it, in his honour. How many brats go ruffling as Maximilian o' these days? If we fathered them all on the King it would go hard with him. Besides, this poor little tramp—but there is the look of my sovereign lady. Who is there of hers? Ah, sorrowful Christ, there was a marriage of which I could not sing in the *Canzon de Reini!* What was that? Let me think. There were three cousins—my mistress, Madonna Hold—she was that tall golden rod who mated with another, even so. The third—the third! The third made a shameful marriage—so-called—a page from the hall won her favours, they said—and she was the heiress, she who fled with the page from that chilly Speir. And this young

woman here hath the Renny look of spurning, and a boy whom she names Blaise Firmin ; "at present," saith she. Firmin, then, was that page's name ! She is his wife, heiress of Coldscaur ! By the Sacred Face, if this should be true !'

He bided his time and watched his companion while awaiting his opportunity. It was night by the time they hoped to see the three branching roads, and a shelter had to be found in a straggling hamlet called Three Ways. No chance turn of the talk—which was mostly his monologue—had led him to what he sought ; but he was pretty sure now with whom he had to deal. The belief sent his spirits up with a bound. Whenever he thought, 'Here, by the grace of God, walk I by Mabilla's kinswoman ; here, if I will, I may touch a hand which hath the same fountain of blood as she ; here I march abreast of one who has kissed and held my Mabilla close in arms !'—at such thoughts the heart of Paulet gave a great bound and stood still afterwards till he lost his breath. He made himself Sabine's slave, carried her little Blaise mile after mile, poured out his money, service, words, music to cheer or sustain her ; nor did he weary to find that she took it from him with the serene acquiescence of princes. This was to him convincing proof that he was indeed in commerce with a Renny. It was like Mabilla in her despotic moods, as he knew well enough. He redoubled his service.

They spent the night on the tables of the Three Ways beer-shop—it was nothing more,—breakfasted there, and next morning had the

delight of striking northward on the Minster Merrow road. The country brightened as they did. They were out of the marshes and among the thick hedgerows, the elms, the well-tilled fields and hazel copses of Marvilion. Between Three Ways and Rewish, where they were to turn north again for the Honeybornes, Paulet bought a donkey for Sabine.

After that they went at better speed, and in three more days saw the spire of Honeyborne Cuthbert and on all sides of the town the tents and ensigns of Don John's army. Ordinarily Sabine was the least anxious of women. Sometimes Paulet doubted of her intelligence, but he as often had to acknowledge that he had done her a wrong. She very seldom spoke at all, but when she did it was undoubtedly to the point. At view of the white innumerable tents, however, she did her wondering aloud.

'Why, there are more soldiers here!' she exclaimed. 'Are there soldiers all the road from Beatonshoe to here?'

'I believe they go farther still,' said he. 'A man at Rewish told me they stretch to Minster Merrow.'

'Ah! Then they corner the border of my—of North Marvilion, where we would go. Why is that?'

'I believe the King levies a war.'

'A war? With whom?'

'With one in the North—a great man.'

'Not with Ger——' She was fiercely keen at last.

‘With the Earl of Pikpoyntz, madam,’ said Lanceilhot.

‘Ah, ah !’ she sighed, ‘that is well done at last.’ She urged her donkey forward as if she wished to be among the tents.

‘Hold, hold,’ said Paulet. ‘We must advise what we do here. The leader of these troops is Don John of Barsaunter.’

Sabine started. ‘Well?’ she asked. ‘Well? He is the King’s brother—is it not so?’

‘He is the King’s brother, truly enough. But he is no friend of mine, and no friend of my friends.’

‘He will be a friend of mine if he wars with the Earl of Pikpoyntz,’ said Sabine quietly.

‘But not of mine, madam,’ cried Paulet, out of himself; ‘for in so doing he will be warring with my friends.’

Sabine stopped and looked down at her companion. She had grown hard as granite.

‘Is Gernulf de Salas your friend, Master Paulet?’

Lanceilhot crossed himself. ‘God forgive me, but I hate him. Yet I must be on his side.’

Sabine, white as a sheet, lifted up her hand. Her voice rose clear as a bell. ‘No honest woman can be a friend to such as Gernulf,’ she cried. And again she called out, ‘Look at me, the mother of this child. Before my young eyes Gernulf slew my father, in sight of me he slew, one after another, my three brothers. With deadly treachery he did it; at a feast; guests should he and his have been at my father’s table.

In my sight he stood up and watched my mother stab herself with my father's sword. Me, then, he took with them to his castle in the North. Will you be friend of such a man? Then you will be no friend to me and mine, for I am Renny of Coldscaur, and the blood of my fathers is ice within me at the sight of what I have seen. And never from that day unto this have I revealed one word of what I know—no, not to my husband. But to you I say it because you declare yourself the friend of a villain. Now let us part, in peace if that be possible.'

Paulet was reeling under this assault when he saw that Sabine meant what she said. She was going direct towards the tents of a man whom he knew, hated, and feared, a man, moreover, who was the enemy of her blood, just as Gernulf may have been. He jumped forward and caught at the donkey's bridle. Sabine's eyes flamed; she looked as if she could have struck him down.

'Hit me if you choose, madam,' said he, 'but you must listen before or after your blow.'

'What have you to say to me, sir?'

'This to begin with, that, having brought you so far on the way to safety, you must not hold me responsible for this end to our journey together.'

Sabine looked a little ashamed of herself at this. However, she corrected herself of that weakness and said nothing. Paulet continued.

'Next, I have to correct a misapprehension on your part. I can well believe all that you say

of the Earl of Pikpoyntz, for little as I have seen of him I have disliked it. He is no friend of mine, as I told you, nor can he ever be. But a friend I have at his house of Speir nevertheless, and she is the Countess of Pikpoyntz.'

'Countess of Pikpoyntz?' echoed Sabine blankly.

'Countess of Pikpoyntz, madam. She is my dear and honoured friend. And of you also she should be the friend, for she is your cousin.'

Sabine lost her breath with her wits.

'Has one dared——' she began.

'I speak of the Lady Mabilla, madam. She it is who has dared, for the sake of Renny of Coldscaur, what she would have recoiled from as an insult to Mabilla de Renny.'

Again Sabine's rage got the better of her judgment. She flared up for her retort.

'It is a strange way to serve me, forsooth, to marry my father's assassin.'

'Madam,' put in Paulet, 'will you tell me from whom she could have heard of your father's fate, beyond yourself and Gernulf, who were both present? As to the Earl, you may guess what he would make of the story. And for yourself, you will remember that you were not at Speir when your cousin went thither. You had already left it—with your husband.' He brought the red colour back into her cheeks again—not for anger this time, but to signal her confusion. When she spoke again it was as Mistress Firmin.

'You are in the right, sir, and I, it seems, am in the wrong. I acquit my cousin Mabilla of

a fault of judgment which would have been a crime. But I do not see yet how she thought to serve me by what she did. Gernulf has withheld from me my inheritance——'

'I understood that you were in his tutelage,' put in Paulet.

'So it is said. Let it be so for talking's sake. Well ?'

'I do not know what was in madam's mind,' said Paulet, rather posed; 'but I see this, that there is assurance of one of the Renny blood holding Coldscaur, whatever be the issue between you and Gernulf.'

'Grateful service to me, sir,' cried Sabine, trembling. 'I think I may be better served in these tents. I am not at all disposed to favour usurpations by members of my house, and for the future shall remember the lady whom you befriend as Countess of Pikpoyntz. I beg you to loose my bridle, sir.'

Poor Paulet might have reminded her that it was, in fact, his own bridle, as the beast was his also; but this did not occur to him. It is curious what the little lady's assumptions obtained her. What he did was that futile thing, to beat against her perversity.

'Before you go, madam, from one who has done his best to serve you, I must ask you to remember that these tents belong to Don John of Barsaunter. He is the King's brother, my prince and yours, it is true. He is, however, here with a distinct object.'

'The object, sir ?'

'The object is the Countess of Pikpoyntz.'

'I have told you already, sir, that I know nothing and care nothing for the Countess of Pikpoyntz. He appears to be warring against the usurpers of my estate, and is, therefore, on my side and that of my son. I have been much beholden to you in the past, and make no doubt that it will be in my power to prove my sense of that. I regret that I can be beholden to you no more. Please to stand aside.'

He did stand, watching with folded arms the girl riding, as he confidently believed, to her own destruction. What he knew of Don John assured him that Mabilla would never have drawn him to so desperate a venture if she had not appeared to him as gilded already with the Renny fief. He was certain as he could be that the Prince would clear the little mother and child out of his path. Now he could not love Sabine, but he thought that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen out of a church picture, and he knew that her patience and courage were beyond any praises of his. She had that indescribable gallantry which he adored in Mabilla. It was every whit as present in Sabine, he knew—not adorably and not so saliently ; it was latent—a passive, stoic gallantry. He supposed all the Rennys to have it. Her mulishness made him sick with rage—gallantry pushed to such a point becomes fatuous, insensate, almost idiotic.

'Accursed little fool!' he cried out in despair, and could have bitten his tongue out, for she was of Mabilla's blood. And, 'Ah,' he admitted, half

whimsically the next minute, ‘I should not like to maintain that my beloved would not have done precisely the same thing. She would have gone sooner, and no donkey could have paced her there quick enough ; but she would have gone for all that.’

But, gracious Heaven ! the little creature—mule or demi-god, whichever she were—had left him a skein to unravel. What on earth was he to do ? Don John and his lumbering machinations of artillery, horse, foot and the rest of them were as nothing while at Speir that red-beaked vulture ravened his white hind. Think what his beloved had done ! In what claws was she even now gripped ! She—Mabilla—married to the treacherous assassin of her kinsfolk, forced to side with him in more butchery to keep that which he had filched ! And tied for her life as far as Paulet was concerned ; for he knew without argument that he could not do anything in this business. According to his instincts of honour he, being the lover of his wife, could neither speak to her against her husband nor dare anything against the husband’s life. That was the code of Campflors honour, in which he had been born and bred. Poet, man of Campflors, lover of Mabilla, he must witness her martyrdom and do nothing.

Might he not by any means kill Gernulf ? He did think this out, and decided that there were two possible events which would justify him in that ; the first was a danger to his lady, the second an attack upon himself. Observe that he took a very serious view of his relations with his Countess

Mabilla. He loved her, she was his mistress—that would do for a relation, he hoped. Gernulf or none, he must still love her, she still command him. At this rate he must go on to Speir, where the troubles pressed hardest, and wait for his chance. By hook or by crook he must not leave that place so long as Gernulf and Mabilla were together. If they left together he must go also. That is the conclusion he came to after a hard two hours' thinking.

He sat thinking so intently that he hardly noticed a continuous stream of soldiery passing along his road on their way to the camp. Had he done so he would have seen that the royal arms were not on the banneroles, but instead a red saltire. Lifting his head from his hands at the end, however, he did see something, and watched with a good deal of admiration the passing of the general with his staff. The general was a tall young man, blue-eyed, hawk-nosed, and with a fair pointed beard. He had a white and green surcoat over his armour, and on his helmet a hooded falcon. ‘The man is as light as a leopard,’ he thought. He even took the trouble to inquire of a follower his name and degrees. The fellow gaped at him.

‘Why, my little buck,’ said he, ‘that is the great Earl of Hauterive, by name Prosper, and by deed the most prosperous fighting gentleman in these broad realms.’

‘Ah,’ said Paulet as he thanked the man, ‘I have heard of him.’ He was to hear more.

CHAPTER VI

DON JOHN'S ALLIANCES

In the camp by Honeyborne Cuthbert and in the Prince's pavilion compliments passed.

'My dear lord,' said Don John of Barsaunter, with his most pleasant smile, 'I make you heartily welcome. You were always magnanimous.'

Prosper of Hauterive bowed to his Prince's hand. 'I have followed the summons, sir. I could do no less.'

Don John hungered over him. 'Ah, my Lord of Hauterive, I could ask no more nor expect so much of some I could name! Well, we will not commit ourselves. I take this from you as proof that all is well between us.'

'I hope so, sir.'

'What differences we have left shall be buried in our enemies' graves—eh, my Lord of Hauterive?'

Prosper bowed again. 'I may learn from that, sir, that our lord the King has enemies?'

Don John bit his lip. 'What other enemies could we have, Hauterive, but my brother's?'

'Quite so, sir. What indeed? May I know next against whom we are to proceed?'

'You may. It is Gernulf of Pikpoyntz.'

'Ah! Gernulf of Pikpoyntz.'

'Do you know him, Hauterive?'

'We have met, sir; but not for some years.'

The Prince leaned back in his chair, stretching his long body across the tent. 'Perhaps if you had met him during those years he would not have got into the mischief he has. He has been playing the ferret—poaching.'

Prosper waited. The Prince went on.

'You have heard of the Rennys, Hauterive?'

'We have all heard of them, sir.'

'It was there he poached. He stole over his border, it seems, and ambushed his men below Coldscaur. He went forward with some half-dozen, ostensibly for the hospitality of the place. But he left not a Renny alive in it, for he murdered all but one, and her he stole, for other purposes.'

Prosper of Hauterive whistled below his breath.

'I beg you to go on, sir. This is interesting.'

'Is it not? Well, he brought in his ambushed cut-throats and, at a given signal, some thousands more pushed over the border. North Marvilion was his. His next move was to apply for a grant of Wardship and Marriage of the Renny heiress—whom he had stolen, observe. That was some five years ago. But you know His Majesty's caution. He has not got that grant. The young lady is in reality still the King's ward. My brother's delay has served the course of justice, you observe.'

'I remember that His Majesty was otherwise

engaged at that time, sir,' said Hauterive, with a gentle smile.

This was not lost upon Don John. 'My dear Hauterive,' he said, jumping upright in his seat, 'you are too loyal a servant of the Crown to bear the King a grudge. My brother has the weaknesses of a man. I hope your Countess made a good journey to High March ?'

'A very good journey, thank you, sir. Shall we resume ?'

'We will.' The Prince resumed his lounging attitude and inspected his brown hands as he talked. 'Pending the granting of the wardship, Gernulf was much engaged in his new domains ; the young lady was no less busy in his old ones, it seems. At any rate, she ran away with a page boy and has never been seen or heard of since.'

'The devil !'

'Oh, I agree with you, Hauterive ! But pray wait. The Rennys hear of these affairs. Stephen of Havilot sets out with his Renny niece, Donna Mabilla, picks up that old galliard of a Grand-Fé at Canhoe, also with a Renny niece, and on they go to Speir. Gernulf meets them at the gate. "Very sorry, your Reverences and ladies," says he, "but the little heiress is gone off with a lackey."'

Hauterive leaned forward. 'One moment, sir,' said he. 'Did the lady marry the lackey ?'

'It appears that she did. She intended to, and it is known where they went to church. The rest is curious. Shall I go on ?'

'Pray, sir.'

'By some shift or set of shifts, Gernulf—who

is as sharp as a fox, as you know—got the Rennys to accept his version of the affair ; he told them a tale of honourable warfare between him and Coldscaur. It appears that the disgrace of the heiress had left them at his mercy. Their game now was to preserve the fief for the next in succession.'

'Ah !'

'They, therefore, married the heiress-presumptive, Donna Mabilla, to the assassin of her blood relations. In ignorance, no doubt—but picture it ! And now His Majesty, feeling that the cup of the man's infamy is full, has determined to endure no more.'

The two men looked at each other. Don John could not conceal his keenness. Prosper spoke next—very quietly.

'Whatever punishment His Majesty may deal out will not be too much, sir, for such a case as this. But—'

'Well, Hauterive, well ? Speak your mind, man.'

'I will say then, sir, that His Majesty's zeal is the more welcome in that it is rare.'

The Prince looked annoyed, grew red ; then his face cleared as if by magic.

'My dear Hauterive, I will be frank with you. I worked upon my brother's feelings.'

'Ah. It is to your Highness the realm is in debt, then ?'

The Prince bowed his head, and resumed. 'I know my brother better than anybody, I think. I put the case before him of that infamous marriage.

He was interested. He asked for particulars. He did not know the young lady so indecorously hustled into Gernulf's bed and throne. I was able to satisfy him.'

'You were able to satisfy him, sir?'

'Yes. I happened to have a miniature of her which had been done by Sanese the Tuscan in my own country.'

'Eh, eh!' said Prosper to himself. 'It seems we are coming to the point at last.' Aloud he said, 'And that touched His Majesty?'

'You know my brother? It did touch him. But it touched things much nearer my desires. Justice, namely, upon this murderer, this robber—for that is what our Gernulf is at bottom.'

'Hum,' said Prosper, half aloud, 'and what is to be our order of affairs now, I wonder?'

'I have sent him the King's writ of outlawry and a summons to surrender North Marvilion to myself. He replies to this that neither he nor his Countess can venture far from the border, which is unsettled, forsooth! It is like to be unsettled until he does leave it. Neither will they guarantee my safe passage to the North. Yours, however, they will undertake. They will receive you, with ten men, to parley. Now, Hauterive, will you go?'

Prosper thought for a little. 'Yes, sir,' he said simply, at the end. The Prince rose.

'Very good. Here is the safe conduct the fellow has sent for you. He seems to have counted upon your going.'

'He knows me,' said Prosper.

'Ah!' the Prince laughed. 'There I have the advantage of you, for he knows not me. Do you know his wife, Hauterive?'

'Yes, sir,' came a very quick answer. 'Do you?'

'Oh,' said Don John, as carelessly as he knew, 'I may have met her at Joyeulx Saber. It is very near my border, as you will remember.'

Prosper was bowing himself out. 'When will you start, Hauterive?' the Prince asked him.

'In half an hour, sir,' said the Lord of Hauterive, who never wasted time.

'You are the man of all the world for me!' cried the Prince, and clapped him on the shoulder.

Prosper left the royal pavilion.

Before his allotted half-hour was up came a breathless messenger to his end of the camp. 'His Highness is asking for you, my lord. Upon the instant,' said the man, gasping.

'I will come upon the instant.'

'What's in the wind now?' thought he as he went.

He very soon knew. He found the Prince not alone in his quarters. Before him and his writing table stood a young girl with a shawl over her head and a baby in her arms. Prosper could not see her face. He was never surprised (or said he was not) at anything; but I think he started at Don John's news.

'Earl of Hauterive,' said his Prince, 'this lady is the Lady Sabine—ah—Firmin, born Renny of Coldscaur. Do you understand?'

'I understand your Highness to say so,' Prosper was content to say.

'Tell my lord your story, madam,' said the Prince irritably. His nerves were playing the deuce with him ; he fidgeted with every member of his body. Sabine turned slowly round to face Hauterive. She kept a steady eye upon him as she said, 'There is no need to tell my story to win the Earl of Hauterive's belief. We are no strangers to each other.'

Prosper went forward and kissed her extended hand. 'There is no need at all, madam. Ten years ago my wife was sponsor for you at your baptism.¹ You were younger then, and I think happier. But I have not forgotten you, and what a man may do for you I shall do now.'

'Thank you, my lord. I am very well friended now,' said the poor child, with brimming eyes—for she was one of those whom only kindness touches ; but, 'H'm ! I am not so sure of that,' said the Earl to himself.

'I am about to set forward upon your business at this moment, Madame de Renny. I shall find your cousin at Speir.' Thus Prosper. Her answer could not amaze him. She stiffened like a frozen flower as she replied, 'The Countess of Pikpoyntz is no kin of mine, nor ever can be.' Prosper's sharp eye saw the Prince embarrassed, saw him wring at his nails with his teeth. 'Well, well, madam, we will do our best for you ; but

¹ The baptism of the great, like other offices of the Church, was bent to the convenience of the great.

we must not quarrel with more than we can help.' Thus Don John unavoidably.

'If I could get a word with that unhappy little lady alone it would be a world to her,' ran Prosper's thought. 'This lean wolf has his own game to play—and it is not her game, pardieu! She will be an awkward piece. He'll be for discarding, I take it.' He looked again at John of Barsaunter, to see him horribly restless, nibbling away at his nails for life. There was nothing to do but as he did.

'At any rate, madam,' said he, 'I shall be able to use your name with good effect in my dealings up there. The fact that you are with the royal army, the army of justice and retribution, will not fail to strengthen the cause we have so much at heart—the cause, let me add, in which his Royal Highness' disinterested love for the realm plays so distinguished a part. I cannot leave you in better hands, madam, and so I shall report at Speir.' He did not wait to look at the Prince's face—a study, however, which would have afforded him some entertainment—but withdrew to his own quarters; and a quarter of an hour after his time he rode out for the North with his ten men.

Lanceilhot Paulet had started on his own account some hours previously, but being without a safe conduct, paradoxical as it may sound, made much better pace. 'I am a poor soldier,' he admitted to himself; 'let us see if I am a better tactician. I will begin by making a little retreat.' He counted his money. The Abbeys

of Bréauté had been generous, as became a musical race at the feet of a boy voiced like a flute. He had still five gold pieces and some silver money. One of his gold pieces he devoted to the purchase of a donkey from a crew of shabby camp-followers he met on his way to Minster Merrow. For a very little silver he was able to procure a cloak, slouch hat, and pilgrim's wallet. Then he discarded his shoes, struck his donkey smartly on the rump with an ash plant, and cantered away to Minster Merrow. To all who met or questioned him he spoke in French. He was bound for the wondrous shrine of Our Lady of Health at Quatrepais—the glory of those parts. This generally sufficed him, and Minster Merrow, with its soaring white church, broad river, and rock-bound citadel, was safely skirted. From there he took the road to Quatrepais. Edging along the North Marvilion border with circumspection he made the mountain ways of Logres unmolested. It was winter, but the snowfall had not been very severe as yet. The passes were open. He arrived at Fauconbridge on Epiphany Day, and heard Mass with a swelling heart which told him that he was but a day's ride from Speir. He had nothing to conceal. On the contrary, he had the Countess' signet to show. On the morrow of the Epiphany he crossed the border without a check, dropped his disguise, put on his shoes, sold his donkey, and got a seat in a sleigh which, with six mules to draw it, was about to pull across to the castle. In his proper character he stood in the gateway craving admission to the hall for the delight of

all within. The advent of a troubadour from the South was a great matter. He was welcomed, as a matter of course, by maids and men alike to a roaring fire, meat, mead, and a promise of the Countess of Pikpoyntz's earliest leisure. He thus arrived more than a week before his lordship the Earl of Hauterive, who had nearly a hundred miles less to go.

That unfortunate nobleman was, in fact, the victim of diplomatic delays designed for his honour. At the border of North Marvilion he had to receive an address and join a procession of the Mayor, Alderman, and Jurats of the city of Cap-Dieu, who had journeyed out in their robes of office to meet and escort him to their city. They rejoiced over him for nearly three days, and made him understand that their lord paramount, the Earl of Pikpoyntz, would be cut to the heart if they omitted any respect to an ambassador of such acknowledged eminence. From there he must go to Caunce-Renny ; more ceremonies—this time religious. It was Christmas. All the reeves of all the neighbourhood thronged in—more addresses, in which unswerving loyalty to the King his master was tempered by unflinching regard for the dignity of the Lord Paramount. He did not get on to Cantacute till three days after Paulet had warmed himself at Speir. On his way he saw the gaunt grey towers of Coldscaur—the only eminence in that level plain, which is North Marvilion. At Cantacute, under the mountains, the ceremonies reached a climax. Snow covered the parade-ground a foot deep. No matter, it must be

swept away that the garrison might parade for the great envoy's inspection. It did parade, and the great envoy was forced to confess that Gernulf's men were worthy ; too worthy for Don John's, he thought, and fully numbersome for his. Their archers were magnificent—long, lithe men ; runners all of them, who worked the long bow-like machines. The cavalry he could not so much admire—‘too much of the mountain thief and too little of the barber about them,’ was his private comment. Their beasts, too, were very well for the Pikpoyntz ridges and ravines, but would be outflanked in the low Marvilion plains and common fields. Finally, under a gigantic escort (with a most detestable band of pipers) he was suffered to reach Speir, having talked more in his four weeks than ever in his life before, and told more lies than he could dare to plead allowance of at the last day.

Gernulf, whose hope had been either to disgust or flatter him—for in the former case he reckoned he would have turned back, and in the latter might be more amenable to treatment—was not there to meet him, for reasons which will be detailed in their place ; but he had no call to miss ceremony. Upon a purple cloth, under a purple canopy, between files of the resplendent household the Earl walked up to the castle. Backward, bare-headed, before him went Shrike. Paulet, who was the least curious of the assembly, compared the guest with his absent host. He thought of the wild beast combats he had seen in his own country, Southern Botetort, and in Gloverne, when some

saint had to be honoured or an earl's daughter happily married. They had pitted boar and gaze hound sometimes. Well! here lived the jowled boar—tusks, fire-rimmed eyes and all ; and here, come to search him out, slipped along the limber hound, hiding under his sinuous ease of limb a jaw of steel and eyes wary for the spring.

Countess Mabilla, almost hidden in her state, welcomed him in the great hall.

But why she welcomed him alone, and with what heart she did it, must now be related.

CHAPTER VII

THE COUNTESS OF PIKPOYNTZ

By her passage from virgin to wife Mabilla de Renny had gained more than her body's crown. More assured as was her beauty, more superb her bearing, her hardy mind gave promise of being her most perfect part. She had, in fact (and so to put it), limed the field of her soul with her experiences and ridded it of some very charming weeds. One of these was the fiction that there was no such thing as love—at any rate, in her economy. While all the mysteries of maidenhood had been exposed for brawling commonplace, here was the strange spectacle before her of a hulking creature of appetite, a border chieftain, 'Bull of the North,' and so on, wallowing in sticky ecstasies which would have shamed a boy of twenty. If love could play such a trick as this on a man of desperate action, might not love have something to say to her, too, some day? She preserved a little wonder. There was still an unknown something which she might hold for splendid. It was true that, little in that sort as she had looked for from marriage, she had found

less, but at times when she turned a candid, discerning eye upon her Earl she was almost awed by the witness of such a tumble. Frankly, after it had ceased to flatter her, when (as the next stage) it ceased to amuse her, she found it pitiable. Gernulf had won her toleration, even her esteem, by his gallantry of attack. True, he came with a crown in his hand, but he had shown a sword in the other, which had inclined her at the end. Now a man who wins by the sword should hold by the sword such a girl as this. If she is to be ruled at all it is not by kindness. Mabilla was not a shrew, but there was a shrewish grain in her blood ; she was as swift as the wind ; swiftness would gain, muddiness lose her.

Something very like the contempt she used to feel for her weak little poet hardened her heart against her fawning giant. ‘Will you please,’ she wrote to Paulet early in her honeymoon, ‘to contrive me a sharp sirvente, my poet ? It should be a dialogue between Hercules and Omphale, wherein the lady tells the hero that she would like to break the distaff over his shoulders. I think I can make some use of it.’ He had complied with a good will, but the drug was too subtle for the patient. She felt inclined to write to Bernart for a spur.

At first she could not fail of being flattered. The man was not a mere fire-eater ; she very soon found out how he ruled his fee. It was by hand rather than word ; more often a look sufficed. She was mated to a born ruler, a king of men, she was apt to think. Here, then, was her king

of men, bewitched by his beautiful and spirited young wife, hugging the chains that bound him, playing the combed savage to perfection. Mabilla always thought soberly of herself when she thought at all, but it is idle to deny that she was flattered. Her critical instinct was drugged ; she repaid his devotions with her brightest looks. The man bathed in her happiness as a bird trails its wings in the sun. When he was not with her, which was seldom, he went about roaring love songs. He gave enormously to the Church, the poor, the monks. He broke out in fine clothes like a new accepted lover, scented his hair, tried to coax his spiky beard. He thus succeeded in darning up the ragged royalty which she had found so much to her mind that she had overlooked the rents in it. Gernulf, for all he looked a battered ruffian, might yet have been a hero. This oily, tagged and bespangled Earl of Pikpoyntz looked what in truth he was, a daw—at home over a gibbet, but ill at ease in a court. Mabilla held off at this transformation ; Gernulf redoubled his efforts to please. He got her to read to him ; then one day, blushing like a girl, he stammered out some verses which he had made to her shining eyes.

He had observed for himself that they had the wet brilliancy of the stars, and said so in three limping stanzas. Mabilla, merciless, laughed till she cried. She allowed him to kiss her cheek—the poor wretch had narrowed himself down to that and her hand by three weeks' polishing of his person—and gravely set to work patching the rhythm. In return she read him Paulet's sirvente,

and, that failing, wrote some verses of her own, in which (though even he could not fail to read the malice) he took enormous pride. He went so far as to recite them to his friends in the hall. She had to stop this. By the end of her moon she was bored to the verge of alarm. What was to be the end of it? How could she whip a spirit into this dull-blooded mass?

Yet all this while he was playing the rogue against her in secret, sometimes (be it said for him) with hot tears in his eyes, often with groans, always with frantic vigils before the crucifix in the chapel to atone for what the day had brought or was about to bring forth. On those nights he absented himself from her altogether. She was thankful but puzzled. Once she found a shirt of his streaked with dry blood, and gradually the tale got about that the grim blasphemer was a flagellant. Shrike, with white eyes of terror, confessed to Nitidis that he had seen his master at it in the grey of the morning. The faithful Nitidis brought it all to her mistress. Mabilla was interested. ‘Love gives very strange pleasures,’ she said with a curving lip; Nitidis was able to agree with her heartily.

The truth was the man would have been rid of the whole hateful business of Sabine and her Firmin if he could, but his affairs were too many for him. Love had cleaned his mind, but he must needs go on fouling his fingers. Mabilla was perpetually asking for news of her cousin Renny. She wanted to go out herself to find her, she more than once decided to go to

Coldscaur. She would have found Blanchmains there ! Pikpoyntz had to lie like a Jesuit to keep her away. He was in constant correspondence with Blanchmains, with Frélus (who was then at Landeveer), with the Prince-Bishop, with his agents at court, who were trying to press on the patent of Wardship and Marriage. His only hope was that Sabine, wherever she might be or go, would keep away from Coldscaur. If she got there, if Mabilla by any remote chance heard that she was there, nothing that he could do could keep the two apart. And if they met—now—Sabine, the only witness to his act, whom he could not bend to his way, would tell the truth. That would be more than his temporal ruin—it would send him straight to a worse hell than God could provide, the blank horror of utter shame in the eyes of his goddess and, actually, in his own eyes ! He knew he could not afford that. Therefore, to save his self-respect he had to go on destroying it patch by patch, had to scheme, shift, lie ; and because he was in love at last he became protagonist in a secret tragedy of his own framing ; he prayed, sweated, watched out nights and cut his great body raw with a scourge. Then came the news of Don John, which has been related already. This, which at first blush bade fair to be his finishing, at second turned to relieve a part of his strain. It awoke the partisan in Mabilla ; it tied his wife to his side. She hated Don John, and grudged (with Renny spirit) his intromission into the Rennys' affairs. She became more friendly; he even looked for more favours than a brush of

her cool cheek. He grew boisterously happy, left off his discipline, at times forgot his miserable traffickings with honour.

When she at last told him her reading of the play, of what had passed between Don John and her Uncle Stephen, Gernulf believed another honeymoon had risen. He was wax in her hands ; she did what she liked—moved all the pieces on the board. Nevertheless, possession of Sabine became of the utmost moment. He wrote urgent letters to Blanchmains—to find, to get Sabine at all cost. He wrote again and again. His miseries began anew with the first of them, grew so sharp indeed that there were times when he was on the point of confessing the whole story to his wife. What withheld him was not her anger, not to see her eyes all a green flame, but her scorn—to watch the cloaking of her in burning ice. If she fell angry with him he could have braved her—anger would call to anger and remorse be blinded in blows ; but scorn in a solitary fighter does not devour like a fire, paralyses rather, numbs you slowly upwards like a frost. He had no champion at his call to face that. Nor was this the worst. To save himself from her scorn he had to earn more of it. All his lies to her hitherto had been tacit. Now they became explicit. He was driven to bluster point-blank denials of the charges in the King's writ. He had to pose openly to her as the benefactor of the Rennys, who had been forced into an unjust war to save himself, and had only killed Blaise de Renny because Blaise de Renny's sword was at his own throat. All this

he had said before to the two Bishops ; but you may lie to a bishop with a cool head where you cannot lie to the woman whom you adore. And Mabilla now began to be restive again—wanted to go to Coldscaur, changed her mind about holding off Don John, wished to have him up at Speir. Lies again for Gernulf. He was never sure how much she believed of what he told her—he was a bad liar under her clear gaze. She had intervals of frowning meditation, looked at him in a puzzled way, which sent his heart to his mouth.

‘If you have done no wrong, I cannot understand why we should not go direct to the King,’ she said.

‘Ah, my life,’ he said brokenly, ‘I have made enemies at court. The King is not my friend.’

‘Enemies !’ she cried. ‘Friends ! Am I to learn you are afraid of your enemies, or dependent on your friends ?’

He shook out an oath at this. ‘No, by God ! you are not to learn that of me.’

‘So I should have said a month ago,’ she observed with what might have been sarcasm, and was at least reproof.

She never let him alone about Sabine now. Was she found yet ? Was Coldscaur ready for her reception ? Who had Coldscaur in charge ? Blanchmains ? Who under heaven was this Blanchmains ? She would like an interview with Blanchmains. The borders disturbed ? Pray did his lordship suppose she was frightened of the borders ? She must assume she was no wife for him if she were, etc., etc. Gernulf’s life had

become one long ache. He felt himself being winnowed like grain. Unfortunately the very part which had attracted her was that which the fan blew away ; what remained might be nutritious food, but it was not what she had chosen. He knew this in a dim, miserable way, and knew that she knew it also.

And know she did. By Christmas time she was profoundly disillusioned. Gernulf loomed in her eyes now as a poltroon ; he threatened to appear a shuffler too. She began to fret over all this. What made it worse was that the Renny crown she had done so much to secure was still in danger. She hardly dared confess to herself that the threat might become a reality for all her lord could (or would) do to prevent it. Whatever attraction the man had had for her—and it had been a real one—was by now sloughed off him like a snake's discarded skin. She began, indeed, to think him uncommonly like a snake, except that he appeared to have no fangs. ‘A blind worm, perhaps, is nearer the mark,’ she laughed in her bitterness.

By the time Epiphany was come and gone she had ceased to be a wife in anything but name. She was quite friendly, still allowed him her cheek when it would have been conspicuous to refuse it, and was able to see the man’s miserable state of desire without a pang. Meantime, she was slowly turning over in her mind various plans of independent action, when Lanceilhot Paulet’s name was announced to her as she sat with her women in the hall. It brought a flame into her

cheeks, a pure fire of simple expectancy. ‘The one of all others !’ she cried, clapping her hands. ‘At once, Shrike, if you please. At once !’ The black slid away, grinning and muttering to himself. ‘Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure for the little Countess at last !’ was the substance of his self-communing.

In her close-fitting gown of blue and frosted white, in her snowy wimple and towering head dress, with her neck jewel, rings and morsed cloak of gold brocade, he thought her an unapproachable divinity reared up high on a shrine unveiled for worship. But when he approached, bowing with his old air of diffident reserve, he found her in a tender mood, a prey to reminiscences, for all her fence of stiff degree. She dismissed her women, grew gentle to see the mist-cloud on his eyes, gave him her hand, and seemed loath to take it back again. ‘Oh, Lanceilhot,’ she said simply, ‘it is good to see a friend in the winter ! Come and sit by the fire. We must talk.’ Nor would she suffer him to drop her hand till they were in the inglenook together.

‘Now, tell me at once, please, why you have come ? No, no ; if that is your only reason I don’t want to hear it. Did you guess I was tired of being married ? Did you think I might be homesick ? Ah, and I am. How did you come —creep out of the college window, or get out for a walk on the ramparts and run away ? Answer me, please, Lanceilhot, at once. Tell me what you have composed—more of the *Canzon de Reini* ? Ah !’ and her eyes grew dewy ; ‘ah !

what will be the end of the *Canzon de Reini*, I wonder? Oh, Lanceilhot; I am puzzled—I am horribly puzzled! Never mind. Let me look at you again.' She looked him critically over, up and down. 'Stand up, please, Lanceilhot. Now! Lanceilhot, you are losing your good looks. All boys do. You used to be charming; you know that very well. You are really almost a man. When you have a beard, Lanceilhot, we will never see each other again. Promise me that.' She ran on, chattering like a girl of fifteen to her bosom friend, and only stopped when she was out of breath.

'Oh, Lanceilhot, I have asked you too many questions,' she laughed, blushing. 'But you must answer them all by degrees. First, why did you come all this way in the winter? A plain answer, please.'

'I came, madam, because I promised.'

'Promised!' She tossed her head. 'Pray what did you promise, and to whom?'

'To you, madam. I said that whenever you needed me I would come on the instant.'

'But what told you that I needed you, sir?'

'Your letter, madam. It hinted at no more than the truth.'

'My letter? Which—I mean, what letter?'

Lanceilhot produced from his bosom a packet which was, perhaps, bigger than it should have been. Mabilla smiled shyly. 'Have I written you all those letters?' she asked, not without a flicker of malice. Lanceilhot's answer was prompt but confusing. He kissed the packet.

'This is the letter, madam.' She hardly looked at it.

'Ah, about Don John. Yes, indeed. So you come to protect me from the Prince ?'

'I am incurably your servant, madam. And serve you I shall.'

'How, Lanceilhot ?'

'I know not yet the state of your affairs, madam ; but I know something of the state of his.'

'Tell me.'

'Your cousin, Madonna Sabine de Renny, is with the Prince.' She started, turned white, and clapped hand to side.

'Ah, ah ! I must think, I must think. That is certainly news.' She had grown older ; the pretty colour, the sparkle and the flutter died out.

'Tell me if her'—she braved the lie—'husband is with her.'

'He is dead, madam.'

'Dead !' She looked frightened. Paulet hastened to guide her thoughts (as he believed) straight.

'Yes, madam. He met with an accident—one dark night in Dunelaund. He missed the road and stumbled into the dyke. I think he was drunk.'

'Pah ! That is near the truth, I do not doubt. Well ?'

'I could not dissuade your cousin, madam.'

'Dissuade her !' shrilled Mabilla. 'Ah, but she must be saved. She must come to us at all cost—at any cost. Lanceilhot !'—she put her

hand upon the young man's shoulder—‘Lanceilhot, here is work for me to do at last. Oh, you cannot know how I have wanted work,’ she sighed. ‘We will go and take her away.’ She was all aglow again, a splendidly ardent creature; but Lanceilhot’s trouble chilled her a little. ‘Ah, it seems I must go alone !’ Paulet got up at this to face her.

‘Madam, I would go with you over the edge of the world. But this is useless—worse. She will not see you.’ Mabilla wondered at his words.

‘Why?’ she asked. Paulet was not quite prepared to answer.

‘Ah, madam, how should I know? But it is true.’

‘I do not understand,’ she faltered. ‘What have I done?’ Paulet took courage.

‘I think it may be that your marriage—I think she regards my lord as an enemy—possibly—I do not know, of course.’

‘But Gernulf is her friend! Has always been her friend! This is impossible. He is even now hunting for her to set her at Coldscaur. The place is all prepared. There is something strange in all this, Lanceilhot. Have you told me all you know?’

He forced himself to meet her keen gaze; forced himself to lie. He dared not tell her the truth about her husband’s deeds. So he lied to her.

‘I have told you all, madam.’

‘Then I must see the Earl this moment.’ This was a hard saying for him.

‘Will you tell the Earl where your cousin is, madam?’

‘Why, of course!’ She was amazed; then something in his look held her. ‘Should I not tell him? What more have you to say?’ Suddenly she caught at his arm. ‘Lanceilhot, you have not told me everything. Why should I not tell the Earl?’

‘Madonna, think of this,’ said the desperate youth. ‘The Prince is my lord’s enemy, because, as you very well know, he comes against him for sake of you. The Prince holds to you as his betrothed. Will you put your lord into his enemy’s hand?’

Mabilla gave a deep sigh of relief before she allowed her lip to curl to her scorn.

‘If Gernulf cannot defend himself against his enemies he is no lord of me, Lanceilhot,’ said she. ‘I shall certainly tell him at once.’

‘Ah, tell him then, madam,’ cried poor Paulet. He kept his groans to himself. Mabilla clapped her hands for Shrike. ‘Tell my lord that I must see him on the instant,’ she said to the black. In a few minutes Gernulf came down the hall.

Lanceilhot, eyeing him keenly, did not fail to notice signs of his harassed estate. The Earl showed a wild eye, a mouth strained to cracking point. He could not keep his fingers quiet, reminded his critic of Don John in that. Still he was the same burly outlaw with the same heavy tread, and looked as prompt for a stabbing-bout in the open as any man still unhanged. It was

significant to notice how Shrike whipped out of his way as he strode through the door.

Gernulf came straight down the hall to where his wife sat. He took no notice whatever of Paulet (who had risen at his approach), but, standing before Mabilla, said in his curt way :

‘At your ladyship’s service.’

‘My lord,’ said Mabilla, ‘my friend, Master Lanceilhot Paulet, has come hither from the Middle Shires with news of great moment. It seemed to me that you should know it without delay. Master Paulet has been through our enemies’ camp.’

Gernulf flashed a hot eye upon the youth. ‘Speak, sir,’ said he.

‘My lord,’ said Paulet, ‘it so befell that between Beatonshoe and Morton Wold, in Dune-laund, I met and was able to serve Madonna Renny of Coldscaur. She was in great trouble. Her husband had been drowned, she was alone with her young child in desolation and the dark. I think she lacked any means of living. At my instance she set out under my care for Cap-Dieu, which is in her own country, and where she has friends. At Honeyborne Cuthbert, which is on the way, we fell in with the force of Don John of Barsaunter—some five thousand men of all arms, well found and provisioned against the winter. Between us two arose a contention, friendly at first, but afterward waxing somewhat harsh, whether she should claim the protection of the Prince or come with me to the more loving

attention of your most noble lady. This was the course I urged upon the Lady de Renny.'

'Well, sir?' said Gernulf in a whisper. He was pale for such a furnace of a man, but the great burnt patches on his cheeks shone still like blood.

'My lord, all my entreaties were fruitless. I could do nothing. The lady went to Don John's quarters, and I came here. At the very time of our discussion reinforcements—three thousand men from the South—came into camp. They were led, as I was told, by Earl Prosper of Hauterive.' He stopped because he found that neither Gernulf nor Mabilla was listening. The Earl was gnawing his beard, watching (but furtively) his wife; the Countess openly stared at her husband until she could bear it no longer.

'Well, my lord,' she broke out in a fume, 'have you nothing to say? Can you not even thank Master Paulet for his timely message?'

Gernulf at this shot up his head with all his old spirit. 'I leave for Marvilion to-day. Your ladyship will not forget that the Earl of Hauterive may be here before I return. It is possible that I may meet him on the way. In that case he will not come on here. But if I should miss him I must ask you to deal with him. We will talk of this before I set out. Meantime I will ask you to have me excused. Master Paulet, be so good as to follow me.' He kissed his wife's hand and went to the library. Lanceilhot turned to his beloved lady for a sign. 'Yes, go, Lanceilhot,' she said in rather a weary voice. 'Go, my friend.'

We shall have plenty of time to talk and arrange matters. No, I will go too.' She called for Nitidis, then turned to Paulet again. 'Leave me, dear friend, for the time.'

He took her hand and held it against her feeble efforts to be free. She seemed embarrassed, as if struggling between will and inclination. Some swift impulse (self-pity, it may have been) drew her to what she did—to urge towards him till her cheek touched his shoulder. 'I am glad you have come, Lanceilhot,' she said in a whisper. He fell at her feet and covered her hand with kisses. At that moment Shrike crossed the hall and Nitidis came in at another door. Paulet was up in a moment, but in such a transport of delight as to have no head. Mabilla was, however, equal to the strait. 'Shrike, show Master Paulet to my lord. I am going to my chamber, Nitidis.'

He found Gernulf with his secretary, tearing and burning papers. The Earl could not read, but it was easy to see that he knew what he was about. He seemed to have a wonderful eye for the landscape of a sheet. Lanceilhot waited respectfully at the door; Gernulf kept him there for a quarter of an hour before he became obviously aware of him. Then he said, 'Come back in half an hour, Martin'; and to Paulet, 'Now, sir, we will have a little more talk, if you please.' Martin left them alone together. Gernulf got up and walked to the fire. After a longish scrutiny of his visitor, he said shortly:

'You met the lady by Beatonshoe?'

'I did.'

‘Who had drowned the man who took her away?’

‘Nobody, so far as I know.’

‘Did you see him drown?’

‘No.’

‘Who told you he was drowned?’

‘A blind man with a fiddle whom I met on my road.’

‘You are certain he is drowned?’

‘I have the man’s word and the assurance of my eyes.’

‘Why were you going up to Marvilion?’

‘To ascertain Don John’s movements.’

‘Who told you he was moving?’

‘My lady the Countess.’

‘Eight thousand men?’

‘With the Hauterive force, yes.’

‘H’m. You are the youth who writes verses—the troubadour—hey?’

‘I am a troubadour, my lord, and now a scholar of Saint Save.’

‘You have known my lady formerly?’

‘She is my friend and benefactress.’

‘You regard her well-being, hey?’

‘I regard nothing else.’

‘We’ll see about that. Now attend to me, Paulet. What reason did Donna Sabine give for not coming here with you? Tell me the whole truth, Paulet, or, by God, I’ll cut you down.’

Lanceilhot paled but stood firm. ‘You will get nothing from me by threats, my lord. Your other hint was shrewder.’

‘What do you mean?’

'Out of my regard for her ladyship's well-being I will tell you what I would never tell her. Nor will you, I believe. The Lady de Renny gave me as a reason for avoiding her cousin that my Lady Mabilla had married the man who treacherously slew her father and her three young brothers, who saw her mother stab herself, and spared her own life only for ends hardly less shameful than these. Hence the Lady de Renny judged the Countess of Pikpoyntz by her knowledge of the Earl.'

Lanceilhot spoke slowly and deliberately, with his eye fixed upon his adversary. Gernulf never moved a muscle. He was so quiet indeed that those who knew him would have grown really alarmed. Paulet knew him not.

There must have been a strain, however, for in the course of a turn or two about the room Paulet saw him (when his back was turned) wipe his forehead with his hand. But his voice did not betray him. Presently he turned and stood over Lanceilhot, breathing very short.

'I have exposed all this balderdash to the persons concerned,' he said, 'and shall not now expose it to you, who are not concerned. But there is one more thing. You told me that you did not intend to speak of these matters to my lady. Am I right?'

'You are right, my lord; I could sooner slit my tongue.'

'Under what circumstances?'

'Under any conceivable circumstances. I cannot imagine an hour coming when it should be necessary.'

'Do you threaten me, fellow?' said the Earl.

'No, my lord.'

'Then what is the hour of which you say that you cannot imagine it? You mean that you can imagine it, I suppose?'

'I said that I could not imagine the hour coming, my lord. I can imagine the hour, of course.'

'What is your hour, sir? Never quibble with me!' cried Gernulf, in a shaking fit. Lanceilhot looked him full in the face.

'The hour when I could help her in no other way, my lord,' said he.

Gernulf stared, then dropped a heavy hand upon his shoulder. There was no doubt about his ferocity now; he was cold with it. 'See here, my little petticoat skulker,' said he, 'my wife befriends you, and you know well enough that her pleasure is a law to me. But when that hour which you imagine so finely comes indeed, I advise you to be out of my reach.'

'I hope it may never come, my lord. I have told you that I cannot believe it will come.'

'You may well hope it, young man. Now leave me. I have business.' He roared for Martin as Paulet left him.

It may be that Lanceilhot would not have been so bold if he had known how far he had tempted his enemy—enemy he plainly was. But Pikpoyntz, who had never loved anybody before, now loved his young wife, and on her account he simply dared nothing against the minstrel. It never entered his head to be jealous of him; all his fury against the boy was that here was another

holder of his secrets—those black vaults of his own soul were slit by another candle beam. The man was desperate, not enraged. Desperate, haggard with the knowledge of what he had done and of what (God have mercy !) he had now to do, he came in before his wife, booted for his winter ride. Frenzy driving him, he picked her up in his huge arms as if she were a doll, lifted her clean off her feet, strained her (desperately hungry) against his breast ; so, between his broken gaspings of misery, love, and self-scorn, he kissed her cold face over and over again. She, taken by surprise, lay where she was caught without a struggle. There was indeed nothing to do but endure what was the strong man's right. She was, however, harder than stone against him, her love long dead, her anger and disgust whistling like a frozen wind through her nose. Against her rocky resentment he beat in vain. ‘Ah, my bride, my life, my heart !’ he mumbled, and fell again to his kisses and sobs. ‘Please to put me down, my lord ; you are hurting me,’ quoth she. Beaten, he set her on her feet ; he held off, panting ; he stood by watching her with wild looks. ‘Do you know whether I love you, Mabilla ?’ He twisted for breath.

‘I have never doubted it, my lord.’

‘Will you drive me out like this ?’

‘I drive no one but myself. The proposal to go is your own or your honour's.’

‘Honour, Mabilla !’

‘Honour, my lord. Is it foolish to name honour to the Earl of Pikpoyntz ?’

‘Ah, God !’

'You propose, I think, to save my cousin from our enemies. Do you owe my cousin nothing or me not so much?'

'I am going. You see that I am going.'

'Well?'

'Tell me one thing first, Mabilla. It is my right to know it. You do not love me any more?'

'I feel about you as I have always felt. You know I have never loved you, nor any one. There is one exception to that.'

'Ha!'

'I do not feel as I did concerning your courage.'

No one would have lived to say this to Gernulf save this young girl, whose slave he was.

'My courage?' He literally faltered his words. 'Is that in question between us?'

'It has been in question between us since our wedding day, I think.'

'You did not doubt it before?'

'No.'

'Now you do doubt it?'

'I must.'

The Red Earl raised his hand. 'As God hears me, I will die unless you unsay that word. I will endure your hate—I have love enough for that. I cannot bear your scorn—for that I have too much love.' He knelt down before her as if she had been his altar, with clasped hands.

'My lady, I am not fit to kneel before you; but love should go for something. You shall know the worst with the best of me before I touch you again. Then you shall decide. It

may be I shall not touch you. But it will not be because you scorn me. I had rather you feared me—

‘Ah, I fear no one,’ said Mabilla simply

‘I had rather you shrunk from me as if I were a leper among men, as if I had leprosy of the soul!’ He beat his forehead and looked about him distraught. Then he got up. ‘But, by God! you shall not scorn me,’ he swore. She had nothing to say, and he but one thing.

‘Good-bye, Mabilla.’

‘Good-bye.’

He went without touching her hand or winning a look of her face. She stood motionless where she was until she heard the horse’s muffled feet in the thick snow.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE OF THE WITS

SOME eight days later Prosper of Hauterive arrived at Speir and was honourably received, as has been declared. Gernulf had not missed him—had indeed taken trouble not to miss him—but could not, nevertheless, shake his purpose to see the Countess Mabilla. For this he had reasons of his own, which he did not reveal to the other, but found strong enough to make persistence worth his while. Gernulf, in the dreadful urgency of his affairs, had to let him go. He dreaded what might be revealed to the piercing eyes of this man of the world far more than any possible revelations which might be made by Lanceilhot. What might lock a poet's lips would be straws in the way of such a politician as Hauterive. However, there was no help for it. He saw him go and then scoured on, riding night and day, on relays of horses, until he reached Cantacute. Thence by the same means he got down to Coldscaur, where for the moment I leave him to fetch his wind and face his troubles.

Earl Prosper and his hostess found each other

charming. He thought her improved by marriage upon what he remembered of her ; she found in him a match for her keen wit and put a finer edge upon her favourite weapon. But all their first day together the fencing was merely preliminary, a thing of finesse and flourish, gallery play—very entertaining, but leading nowhither. Neither was inclined to come to work ; neither knew how much the other guessed ; moreover, there was a certain hesitancy born of a genuine liking on either side. Mabilla avowedly (to Lanceilhot) tried to please.

She was high-spirited, frolic, and a child by turns. He found that each rôle became her, though none quite deceived him as to the real Mabilla. Lanceilhot, who was admitted to more intimacy than Speir understood—though Campflors would have thought nothing of it—was present most of the time to lend a hand. He sang, improvised ballades and sestinas, reeled off cantos of his *Gests of Maximilian, called The Gross*. He told stories hours long, and maintained with great good temper an excited argument upon a learned subject in which Earl Prosper's ignorance was only to be equalled by his brilliance of attack. Mabilla begged him for the *Canzon de Reini*, but in vain. They all went to bed in great good humour with themselves, heard Mass next morning, broke their fast, and then settled down to serious work. Mabilla tried hard to get Lanceilhot to her side again, but Prosper had taken care for the youth—she had to face him alone. This she did, and began to attack at once with a quick home-

thrust : ‘ We have wondered greatly over your new alliance, my lord,’ she said. ‘ It is one upon which at least we can congratulate Don John.’

Prosper gave a short laugh. ‘ I cannot always choose my company, my dear lady, as your lord could tell you, doubtless.’

‘ You can sink differences, you would say, in the view of great ends ; yes, I can understand that,’ said she. ‘ But the ends would needs be very great to bring you to court,’ she continued.

‘ Madam, I have no reason to love Maximilian de Flahault, but equally none to refuse to serve King Maximilian III. Moreover, in this instance, I am the ally of the King’s brother.’

‘ Have you any reason to love him either ? ’

‘ None that I know of to love John de Flahault, madam.’

‘ Yet you fight his battle, my lord.’

‘ No, madam. If I fight, which I do not say I shall, it will be for Prince John.’

‘ Is Prince John for the King, my lord ? ’

‘ Surely, madam. Who else should he be for ? ’

‘ I have often found him for—Prince John,’ said Mabilla.

‘ Ah, you know him then ? ’

‘ I know him very well,’ she said quietly, with a smile which she meant to be provocative.

‘ How well, madam ? ’

‘ Too well, my lord,’ she replied, and scored the first hit. Prosper was left wondering whether what she knew accorded with what he guessed. Mabilla pursued her advantage.

‘ In this latest adventure of Don John’s I must

either discredit his motives or his brains. To which side I incline it might be uncivil of me to declare to his ally; but you will see, my dear lord, that if his Grace's aim be the restoration of my cousin Renny of Coldscaur, he can accomplish it without an army of eight thousand men. He has only to escort her over the border. She will be received with open arms by her friends, who have asked nothing less ever since she took the step she did. So that if Don John is honestly come in force, by this time your embassy will be in vain—happy as it has made me to have you here. If, on the other hand, he has come dishonestly, he will retain my cousin prisoner and render frustrate all my own efforts and those of my Lord of Pikpoyntz. In the one case he will prove a fool to have brought so large a force, and in the other a knave to use it.'

Prosper was delighted with the girl's spirit and point, but took care not to show it.

'Dear Countess,' he said, 'it is not hard to see which way you incline. I confess—I have already confessed—that while I serve the royal house I take care to avoid the royal householders. Meantime there is one little matter which you have overlooked. Delicate as it is to touch upon, I should show less respect to you by omitting it than by dwelling upon it. His Majesty has been advised to declare my Lord of Pikpoyntz an outlaw.'

Mabilla smiled. 'Oh, I know that very well, my lord. The Earl of Pikpoyntz has never concealed his adventures. Even when they have

been directed against my own house he has not scrupled to declare them to me. If he is to be outlawed for levying war on a troubled border, it is to say that if he will not submit to be kicked he shall be hanged !' He admired the fine colour of the speaker and of the things she spoke.

'The terms of the writ are, however, precise, madam.'

'Do you find them precise, my lord? For my part, I find them guardedly general.'

'I forbear to repeat them, madam. And as to what you say of your own house's share in these events, I find it hard to believe that you have heard the truth.'

'It is because I have heard the truth that I speak as I do, my lord,' she replied, with a steady eye upon him.

'From whom have you heard it, madam?'

'From an eye-witness, my dear lord.'

'Ah! From the Earl of Pikpoyntz?'

'From no other.'

'Oh!'

She fired up in earnest at this. 'Pray, my lord, do you doubt the fact?'

'I cannot doubt that the Earl was an eye-witness of his own warfare, madam,' said he, bowing.

She was silent, but looked coolly before her. He could not be sure that the second hit went to him.

She faced him a third time. 'Gernulf has now gone to Coldscaur,' she said.

'I met him, madam.'

'He hoped to have saved your pains to come

here. Did he tell you that he was going to see Don John ?'

Prosper bowed.

'Did he tell you why ?' she pursued him.

'He told me that he hoped to induce your cousin Renny to accept his escort to her own house.'

'Well, my lord ? Was not that the least that Don John could do ?'

'I will not answer for Don John ; but I will answer you as I answered your lord, that it is the last thing your cousin will do.'

Mabilla blinked at this. 'I have thought of going to see her myself.'

'Do not go, Countess.'

'Not ?'

'No. Your cousin would not see you.'

'She believes us her enemies ?'

'She believes that.'

'Does she think that she will be better served by Don John ?'

'It would seem so, madam. She looks upon your lord as her chief enemy and upon you as her chief enemy's wife. She thinks Don John has come to restore her to her lands.'

Mabilla turned upon him like lightning—an illuminating flash.

'And do you believe it, my lord ?'

'My dear Countess,' he replied, with a shrug, 'I can, at least, see this. You are the next in succession to your cousin and her child. Her husband is dead. Your lord's interest might be that the fee should come to you. Don John's

might be that it should not. Justice would be on Don John's side—for once, if you choose ; but it would be there.'

Mabilla delivered her blow. ' My cousin was not married,' she said ; ' the child is illegitimate.'

That staggered him for a moment. When he recovered he said : ' Well, in that case, self-interest might join hands with justice. Don John might marry the lady.'

Mabilla recoiled, but only for a feint. Then she lunged.

' Don John wants to marry me, my lord. He has always wanted that, and now he wants it more than ever, for upon Sabine's death Coldscaur is mine.'

Third hit went to the little lady, who may be congratulated upon its neatness and force. Prosper felt that he was run through the body. He got up and bowed. ' If you can convince me of that, madam,' said he, ' you must give me time to consider my position.'

' I will certainly convince you, my dear lord,' she said calmly. And she did, and won her battle.

My Lord of Hauterive went away to ponder with many head-shakings, but with no ungenerosity over his defeat. He was a keen eye, what Campflors would call *fine lame*, this hawk-eyed Earl—and quiet with it all. Mabilla could be quiet enough when she chose, but when the time for pouncing came none could pounce better. Prosper admired her dramatic eye. ' How she brought down the heralds upon me with her news of

Barsaunter's inventions !' he exclaimed to himself. 'Admirable in an old hand, but in a budding girl—Lord of Battles !' Then he thought it out. 'Is it possible that I am here to help Don John to another man's wife—and for no better reason? Pest ! His Majesty himself proposed but lately to help himself to mine. I must discourage this family trait.' Not much head-shaking was required to confirm this resolution. 'It seems I am impaled on the horns of a dilemma,' he exclaimed, with a laugh. 'For it is as impossible to help Earl Gernulf to slaughter as Don John to abduction. Eh—eh !' he pursued his thought, 'there would be a shrewd hit for my little duellist if I dared to use it. She believes in her bullock of a lord. I could destroy that faith at a blow. But have I a taste for image-breaking ? I think not. God knows we are all vulnerable somewhere. My little Isoult at home believes in me—Heaven help her ! What man is worthy of that ? If a woman loves a man it is because she trusts him ; if she trusts him it is because she loves him—sometimes. Which is it with this one ? It is nauseous to suppose one so keen and fine throughout should give herself to love this heap of bad flesh, but——' He ended with a shrug. 'If I could be certain of her mind ; if I could know how she cared —what the upshot would be——' This set him rubbing his chin. 'Eh !' he cried at a sudden flash, 'eh ! I am getting fat, I am a fool—there is the little poet. If he knows nothing, I am a fool incredible.'

He went at once in search of his little poet

and found him in the library, curled about a book upon the hearth. Not far off were his tablets and a quill. Prosper stood looking at him, with a twinkle in his eyes which gave the go-by to his words.

'Master Paulet,' said he, 'I assure you that I can hardly behold you with patience.'

Lanceilhot, always respectful to his betters, even when they dealt with matters in which he admitted no superior, stood up before his visitor.

'Why so, my lord?' he asked. Prosper shrugged enormously.

'That a man of good sense should spend his hours trying to fit syllables to certain spaces in his head passes my wit,' said he. Lanceilhot smiled.

'The analysis is ruthless, my lord, but the method of it easy. Let me try my hand. I might complain of your lordship's calling.'

'How so, friend?'

'That you spend a prodigious amount of breath trying how many holes you can make in another man's body with a pointed iron.'

Prosper laughed. 'It is easy to see that you are a poet, Master Lanceilhot.'

'It's not so easy to be seen that you are not one also, my lord,' he returned soberly.

'Eh—eh! What are you saying there, my friend?' asked Prosper. 'You must justify that.'

'Willingly, my lord. The poet's duty is to discover the essence and adorn it with his wit. You have discovered the essence of music and your wit has made it admirable.'

' You flatter me, Master Paulet,' said Prosper, ' or you flatter my intuitions, for I have told you already that I know nothing of your art. I will go as far as to confess that to me it seems to deal by preference with the unsubstantial and to depend for its quality too much upon the state of the weather or the poet's health. This is even so when it treats of highly substantial affairs, such as women—'

' I am very fond of women,' put in Lanceilhot.

' I can well believe it,' said Prosper. ' But let me finish. Now, suppose that instead of revealing such a subject as a woman is, as a mystically removed and adorable being, whose effect upon yourself is the real theme of your art—supposing you were to observe her as one in like case with yourself, having two legs, a sufficiency of fingers and toes, a mouth to eat withal (as well as to be longed after), and a head which by every law of nature should hold brains before it deserve to be crowned with stars. Imagine or study such a creature confronted with the stress and wear of the world.'

' I could very well do that, if I dared, my lord,' said the youth, grown very grave.

' Capital, my friend. Dare for a moment in my company. Let us pursue. Such a woman as we now imagine is weak in body maybe, but she has (assume it) a pretty wit ; she is deficient in logic, but she can jump truer than most of us ; she can fib if she may not lie ; she hath most eloquent silence. She is not such a fool as to love so long as she may be loved—at least,

suppose it—and, as I read, she considers that the state of being loved is worth all heaven in a privy garden.'

'A moment, my lord,' Paulet broke in, highly interested. 'All this is like enough, but it presupposes that she so considers because she has never loved herself. To be loved and to joy in being loved above any loving may be prudence or philosophy, but it is not nature. My imagination works truer here than your study.'

'It is your study I wish, my dear friend, and not your imagination,' said Prosper. 'Wait till I have done. Set now this woman of mine between two men, one of whom adores her and asks nothing but her acceptance; the other finds her full of charm and would be sorry to see her put in the wrong. We will call these two the devotee and the friend. Now the friend knows more of the devotee than the lady does, and the more he knows of him the less he likes it. He would interfere but for one thing. He believes that the lady is more than tolerant of the devotee. He believes that devotion is necessary to her. Call her a shrine. Well, offerings are more than tolerable to a shrine; they are acceptable—they may be essential. Now what will happen in this case of three? I should tell you that I suppose my lady to have a keen wit.'

Paulet was no match for Prosper of Hauterive. He was unable to conceal his agitation.

'Sometimes, my lord,' he said in a low voice, 'sometimes a cloudy mixture may puzzle the

analyst who seeks to simplify by taking away. Let him, rather, add something, and the elements resolve. To your party of three I would add a fourth.'

'Eh—eh,' thought Prosper, 'what is coming now?' Aloud he said, 'Well, for your fourth, Master Lancelhot?'

'I would add,' said Paulet earnestly, 'another devotee, of whom the worst that could be said was that he had nothing but his devotion to commend him, and the best that as his devotion was of old standing and known acceptance there was nothing about him for discovery or concealment. Would that simplify your friend's case?'

'Really,' said Prosper, 'I don't know that it would, unless in a way much after your fashion (according to you). I mean by one devotee killing the other.'

'That he would not do, my lord, if he was a true devotee.'

'I agree with you. Nor would he, I think, reveal what he knew concerning the other.'

'No, my lord,' said Paulet firmly, 'that he would assuredly not reveal to any living soul, save to one—and that only in case of sheer necessity.'

'And to whom would he then reveal it, do you suppose?'

'To the other devotee, my lord.'

'Ah! I understand you. Yes, indeed. And that might resolve the broth.'

'I have learned a thing or two from this masquerade,' said Prosper to himself. 'The little

poet is the lady's slave ; the lady does not object. The little poet knows the master's history ; he has told the master so and threatened to tell him again. I think I may add that if the lady has any preference, it is for the little poet. What, then, am I to do ? I will not help Don John to the Countess of Pikpoyntz. I will not help the Countess of Pikpoyntz, because I should help the Earl of Pikpoyntz, who is a common assassin. Remains the poet. Should I help the poet ? H'm ! H'm ! I am not so sure. He is an honest youth, and a pleasant-faced youth, and modest ; but what is to be the end of it ? Renny of Coldscaur ? Ah, *par exemple* ! Remains what ? Remains that poor Mme. Justice, pardieu ! Suddenly he slapped his thigh. 'Lord of Battles ! Where is that long-legged smiter with the long sword who was half-brother of this brave little Countess, half-brother of the Mabilla de Renny he still is ? He is a fifth element. True, it will be an unwieldy brew ; but I think he will resolve it. I will go South with nine men. The tenth shall take Canhoe on his way.'

He sat down then and there and wrote Viscount Bernart a letter :

'MY DEAR LORD,' it ran, 'I know that you love not the place whence I write to you, but neither do I. I know, however, that you love at least one person in it, as I also do. When I tell you that that person stands in more peril from her seeming friends than from her declared enemies, I think you will overcome your repugnance and pay her a visit. At present she

is alone ; but that will not be for long. If you were here in three weeks' time you would not be too late. I am shortly for the South, and say no more but that I am the friend of you and your friends,

PROSPER, EARL OF HAUTERIVE.'

The letter was sent, and two days later Prosper himself announced his departure. He had one more conversation with Mabilla, in which he gave her to understand that he would give no help to Don John of Barsaunter in so far as that personage aimed at things unlawful.

'I dare not say that I will not help the King, madam, but in saying so much you must understand that I will help Maximilian III. by the grace of God, but not Maximilian de Flahault by the disposition of John, his brother. I will help justice if I can ; but that will not be by working more injustice.' So Prosper.

'I cannot admit, my lord,' said Mabilla, 'that any injustice has been done on our side.'

'I do not ask you to admit it, madam. I ask you to trust me.'

She gave him her hand. 'I do trust you, my lord. I will even ask a favour of you.'

'It is granted, Countess,' said he.

'My cousin, Donna Sabine, is unjust, I believe, to me and to my lord. Nevertheless, I want to serve her if I can. So long as you are near Coldscaur, so long as you are with Don John, will you watch over her on my account, and will you send me word of any danger pressing her ?'

'I will certainly do it, madam. You may rely upon me.'

'I have always been able to do that,' said she, and smilingly gave him her hand to kiss. Whereafter he shortly departed.

CHAPTER IX

TREATY OF COLDSCAUR

THE thaw in the midlands set in early that year ; Gernulf pounded down from his Cantacute peaks into a welter of pock-marked snow. He finished his reeking course in a rainstorm, against which the flag upon the Coldscaur keep made no pretensions to hold out. Blanchmains herself met him in the hall. She crossed her hands over her bosom, dropped him a deep curtsey and waited to smile upon him. But the Earl was in no mood for her sport. He now abhorred this white-faced minion of his old days as much as himself ; not the least of his mental torments had been the thought, the certainty, of what he must do when he met her, if he wished, as he could not help wishing, to keep in with her. He took her hand, drew her up, put his arms about her, kissed her lips, with much the feeling of a man who should kiss a rat. ‘Come with me, monkey,’ he said, not looking at her. ‘I have much to say to you.’

‘Are you all alone, my king?’ she asked.

‘Yes, yes.’ He had much better reason than she knew of for that.

They went into an inner room, and there the terrible play began. What the work cost the unfortunate man it is hard to guess. He had not lied all his life ; he was one who had carved, not crawled, his way to his needs. Now he had to lie for his life—since Mabilla was all his life—and lie to a born liar, this cold, smiling, chalk-faced creature, whose very need of his lies was a lie more palpable than his. She did not want his love, and he loathed to give it her ; but he, wretched slave, must pretend to offer what he knew she did not need. It cost him more than a winter campaign, yet he did it, and got his story out. He learned that his foe Don John had Sabine in his hands ; he saw that Sabine must absolutely be brought to Coldscaur. That is what it came to. The urgency of the problem relieved the strain of its horrid relation. Blanchmains jumped from him to think the better. Gernulf covered his face with his hands, a sign of weakness in him, if the girl had had time to consider him.

‘I know what I should do if I were Don John,’ said she at last.

‘Well, my child?’

‘I should do just as I should if I were Gernulf.’

‘If you were Gernulf, monkey, you would throne her at Coldscaur.’

She smiled. ‘Yes—for a season.’

Gernulf was not so sure, but he said nothing

of that. ‘I hope you may be right, my dear. It is what I am going to arrange, if I can.’

‘Will the Prince come hither, my lord?’

‘No, by God!’ said he.

‘I have never seen the Prince, my lord.’

He forced himself to pinch her ear. ‘And I intend to take very good care that the Prince sees not you, my beauty. I distrust that milk-white face of yours when princes are to hand.’ She looked slyly at him; he had pleased her. There must be more coaxing of the sort, he saw. He put his arm about her neck as he went on. ‘I must keep Coldscaur for my jewel-box if I can,’ he said. ‘Leave me to deal with Don John. What you have to do is to open the house when I tell you and to shut up what I tell you. You have heard that the cub Firmin has got his deserts? That is your doing, I suppose, Missy?’

‘It is and it is not,’ said Blanchmains. ‘My agent did her part too well.’

‘Her part? Did you send a woman?’

‘I did, and she drew a man after her. That made the plan miscarry.’

‘Ha! I see that. But you should have sent another.’

‘I could not. Don John had by then cut me off from the South.’

‘Well, we must do the best we can. Keep her safe when you have her.’

‘Oh, safe enough, dear heart! Where should I keep her safest, think you?’ He read the meaning in her narrowed eyes; it sent a chill through him. He must guard against this.

'Mind me now, Blanchmains,' he said in his old voice of authority, 'nothing done without a word. Let her be as mistress of the Scaur till my word comes.'

'And when will it come, my heart? Oh, do you think I can wait for you for ever?'

'It will come when it comes, Blanchmains. Leave it so.'

She sighed. 'I must, I suppose. And what will the word be?'

He thought for a minute. 'It will not be a word,' he said; 'it will be Shrike.'

'Shrike!'

'Yes. I shall send him here. You will keep a watch for him on the road. When you see him coming you will act. You will not let him in, nor have speech with him, nor let him see your face. You will cause a message to be delivered to him at the gate—the one word 'Sped.' And with that he shall post back to me. Do you hear this? Will you follow it exactly? Or shall I say it again?'

'You never need tell me a thing twice,' said the girl. 'It shall be as you say. And now—oh, my king! it is late!'

'Ah, God!' cried he; and with that sound in my ears I leave him.

A few days later his encounter with Don John took place. The enemies met at Fording-pass, a little hamlet on the borders of North and South Marvilion—admittedly neutral ground. There was a fine array of tents on either side; for Earl Gernulf went down in state and the

Prince had all his captains about him. A long pavilion of cloth of gold stood on the border-line, which happened to be on the edge of the village green. Over this sailed a white flag. Two Pikpoyntz halberdiers kept the north door, two of the royal bodyguard the south door. Across a green table in the midst the Prince and the outlawed Earl faced each other, flanked by their retinue.

Gernulf was in good fettle. This was a kind of work he never tired of. Don John, fretted by delay, was as restless as a caged wolf, paced his side of the table without end and could not keep his eyes any stiller than his fingers. This augured badly for his diplomacy, for the other was as steady as a rock, said his say with a snap, and expected an answer to the considerations he urged in that pistolling manner.

Gernulf's arguments were these :—Both sides wanted the same thing in effect — justice for Renny of Coldscaur. For his part, he had been seeking her ever since her unfortunate escapade with the page. The place was hers, he was ready to put her in it at once. He and his wife (the lady's cousin) had made every arrangement for her comfort and dignity. They would guarantee absolute and entire surrender to her of every stick in the shire. Until she was of legal age there must, of course, be a guardian to perform the services and answer the King of his dues. The question of the patent of wardship might be held over, he submitted. If His Majesty deemed that the next in blood and her

husband were not suitable, let there be another guardian. My Lord of Hauterive, for instance, an old friend of the house, might serve. As for the outlawry, he (Gernulf) was prepared to plead a full answer to all the unproved charges recited in it; he could show that His Majesty had been misinformed. If, nevertheless, the wardship was to be denied, the outlawry pursued—well, the Earl of Pikpoyntz would advise with the Countess of Pikpoyntz. But all this had nothing whatever to do with Donna Sabine. Coldscaur was waiting for Renny of Coldscaur—and then Gernulf himself waited to hear what the Prince had to say.

Don John, biting his nails furiously, made various objections. He was not prepared to trust Gernulf after what had passed, concerning which, he said (with a snarling grin more eloquent than his words), he had been most accurately informed. The King had acted advisedly in everything which had been done; his own responsibilities to the King were very great, etc., etc. As for the wardship, it was clean impossible. Gernulf's lawless acts forbade it. And more to the same tune delivered in half sentences, choked bursts of confidence, and accompanied always with that pent-up delirium which made the lean brown man seem at times as if he was preyed upon by a devil. 'I wish I knew what was griping you, my Prince,' thought the other, and began to urge the claims of his young wife. The hard glitter in his opponent's eyes at every mention of her name did not escape him. He began to

see that Mabilla was his trump suit if he could only bring himself to play her. But he could not, and so fell back upon Coldscaur for Sabine.

Now, Don John was every bit as keen to be off with that unaccommodating little lady as his enemy was to be on. Indeed, if Gernulf's design (as he suspected) was to get hold of her for the purpose of getting rid of her, it was one with which he could have no quarrel whatever. It would clear the way for Mabilla. It was Mabilla Don John was after; and if he could get her crowned, so much the better. Gernulf then, while playing his own game, would be playing the Prince's, and in more senses than one, since that very step which would bring Mabilla in would infallibly, if things went aright, give him the means of putting Gernulf out. He must be caught red-handed, of course; but there were spies enough for that. On the whole, therefore, he was disposed to favour the proposal, though the thing must be done by decent degrees. It was very well calculated, as you will at once perceive: had, indeed, but one drawback—Don John could not possibly know that Gernulf's whole interest at the moment was to get Sabine to Coldscaur and to keep her there alive. He did not know the state of affairs between the Earl and his Countess, nor that Gernulf's only chance of regaining his wife's toleration (the poor wretch was craving no more) was to give the lie to what he so dreaded her discovering—namely, the truth. Don John could not know this. Prosper of Hauterive might have enlightened him, but he was away, would not be

back for ten days at the earliest, and patience was not a mark of the Flahault dynasty—those galley-slaves of desire. Therefore, when Gernulf began to talk of Countess Mabilla, Don John's eyes grew dangerously bright, his lips unhealthily dry, and his steps to and fro those of a dancing marionette. He always progressed by jerks.

Watching him intently, Pikpoyntz saw nothing but indications that Mabilla had rightly divined this hungry prince of the blood. ‘The fellow wants my wife,’ thought he to himself, ‘and nothing else. As for Sabine, he’s longing to be rid of her; and as for justice, he has as much regard for that as he ever had or any of his race.’ He laughed to himself as he thought of the Prince’s chances at Speir. ‘Twould be a piece of sport to see my little lady play with him! She’d have but to wag her finger to make him go souse in the fish pond! By God, I stand to lose nothing by the move—we’ll have him up! ’

He resumed negotiations at this stage. ‘Highness,’ said he, ‘I am a man of action. Words speedily fog me. Be patient with me, then, while I hack out my thought. I believe I am in complete accord with your Highness on what I take to be the pith of the contention. Madam de Renny should be seated in her own castle. I ask nothing more but leave to serve her; your Highness will find no enemy in me on that ground. There are other matters, I am aware. My tutelage, my outlawry—matters, if I may put it to your Highness, ripe for discussion and ready for the proofs. I put this before your

Highness as a proposal. Reject it if your wisdom bids you, but until then ponder it. Let Madam de Renny go into Coldscaur, and do you and I then take the road for the North. Speir is a good-sized house. It has never yet harboured its lord paramount or his deputy. My lady the Countess will welcome her Prince and her friend in one. There should be pleasant times. In the intervals, myself and my knights will confer with your Highness and the lords of the Council. Is it fairly said, sir? I appeal to you, my lords.'

He turned to the Council. None of them was ready to deny that he had spoken fairly. Peter of Bellesme, the constable, hated Gernulf, but had nothing to say. Jervais of Bréauté, who was in Don John's secrets—or most of them—openly advised the move. The Archbishop of Asturias (a fool) and Simon Meschamp (suspected of knavery) held their tongues, waiting to see which way the wind set. Don John was chewing his fingers.

'I must confer with my Council, my lord, before I can answer you,' said the Prince at last. 'I do not deny the reasonable tone of your adoption, but there are many things to be considered. Madam de Renny may have something to say; she must be consulted as to the—ah—probable effect of her going upon herself and the heir.'

'The heir, sir?' cried Gernulf.

'Yes, my lord, the heir,' replied the Prince, stopping short in his studies. 'The lady has a child.'

Gernulf's eyes shone like fire. He loved a dramatic thrust.

'The child is a bastard, sir. The lady was not a wife.' The effect upon the Council was immediate. Obviously the point told for the husband of the heir-presumptive. The Prince affected a surprise which he did not feel to hide a relief which he did feel. He was glad of the pretext to accept the Earl's offer.

'This is a strong statement, Earl of Pikpoyntz,' said he, after a decent pause. 'Can you justify it?'

'I have the proofs at Speir, sir. The rogue who played priest confessed. I have the confession under seal.' To himself he thought, 'I have you now, you brown thief'—which is exactly what Don John thought also, *mutatis mutandis*.

The Prince turned to the Council. 'My lords,' he said, 'I shall be glad of your censures upon the proffer of the Earl of Pikpoyntz. It would seem that all of the parties concerned in this affair have need of some washing. The lady has been, to say the least, hasty in her actions. As well as her wardship it now appears that her marriage may be in our determination. I feel, for my own part, that something is due to my Lord of Pikpoyntz. He stands, by the courtesy of the realm, next in succession. Any return of the lady to Coldscaur should be made a matter of very precise limitations upon which, I think, the heir-presumptive should be heard. My Lord Constable, what do you say?'

Peter of Bellesme, a stout black-browed man of forty, was clearly of the Prince's opinion; the Archbishop and the Canon could hardly be less.

As for Jervais of Bréauté, that sleek youth smiled demurely when he met his master's feverish eyes.

After a little further talk the treaty was drawn up, very much to Gernulf's liking. Sabine was not so much as consulted. The terms of it were, very briefly, that an escort from Coldscaur should come down to Caunce-Renny to receive the Lady Sabine de Renny 'and those of her household'—little Blaise Firmin, to wit. It was clearly recited that the lady was unmarried and that the Lady Mabilla, Countess of Pikpoyntz and the North Mark, was heiress-presumptive. The questions of Wardship and Marriage were held over for negotiations at Speir, which the Prince and his Council would attend. The document signed and sealed, Gernulf (armed with a duplicate of it) set off for Coldscaur with his men. The Prince and the Council, with a personal escort of a hundred of the royal bodyguard, were to accompany Sabine over the border as far as Caunce-Renny. So soon as she was delivered up Gernulf would join the force and lead it to Speir. It is difficult to say who was the better pleased of the parties to this admirable arrangement.

The Prince, for his part, treasured his secret thought. Bréauté worked hard to get a share of it, but it was hopeless. Don John was in one of his tigerish moods, distrusted everybody, and kept his tent as well as his counsel. It was well for him, as he thought to himself more than once, that Prosper of Hauterive was on his travels. That astute man of war was a match for him.

To provide against him, indeed, an early day had been fixed. Sabine, though she did not know it (or, at any rate, did not show that she knew it), was a prisoner in all but the name. As such she was brought up to Fordingcross on the day following the treaty signed ; as such she was curtly informed, three days later, that she must be ready to mount her litter in a few hours' time. ‘What is the meaning of this, my lord ?’ she asked, stiffening her neck. Jervais de Bréauté made a bow. ‘It is His Highness’s pleasure, madam,’ he said.

‘Whither do we go, my lord ?’

‘We go to Coldscaur, madam.’

‘To Coldscaur, sir ? And with what pretence, pray ?’

Jervais lowered his expressive eyes. ‘Madam,’ he said meekly, ‘with every pretence of law and justice, I do assure you. Your ladyship sought the King’s arm to clear your passage. The King’s arm has done this, and it only remains for the King’s brother to lead your ladyship to your own again.’

Sabine was silent, bit her lip ; Jervais bowed himself out.

She got no more speech with Don John till the very end. At Caunce-Renny she once more looked upon her own cloudy lands. If the mist had lifted, she might have seen many-towered Coldscaur keeping watch over the plains which Eudo the Wolf had won for her by his red sword. Instead she saw the grey fog wrapping a silent company. The soldiers sat half-hidden, the tops of their spears out of sight ; there were kneeling

women and bare-headed men whose faces showed white and hard out of the murk. At the door of her litter stood Don John, also bare-headed, with a grin that looked as if his mouth had been cut with one sweep of a knife.

‘Welcome, madam, to your inheritance,’ said he. She did not move from her brooding posture.

‘It is dark, sir. I cannot see anything ; who are all these kneeling people ?’

‘We are yours, madam,’ said a low beseeching voice.

‘Is it you, Blanchmains ?’ The girl shivered a little. It was very cold. Blanchmains advanced and knelt nearer to the litter.

‘Yes, it is I, madam, your servant Blanchmains.’ Sabine recoiled.

‘Ah, you are not mine ; you are Gernulf’s.’

‘Madam,’ said Don John, ‘all the people here are your servants. The Earl of Pikpoyntz has nothing to do in North Marvilion. Will you now alight ? We have far to go, and the season is not of the best.’

‘I know not what I should do, sir,’ Sabine stammered. ‘I have no trust for these people. They are not mine. All my people have been murdered. I stand quite alone.’ She looked pitifully about for a friendly face—instead of that saw Don John’s, where there was no concealment of his anxiety to be done with the business ; she saw Blanchmains, trying for once in her life not to smile ; she saw the stupid white masks of the kneelers—mouths open, eyes peering at her ; and she saw

Jervais of Bréauté shrugging in his furred cloak.
Aliens all.

An exclamation of impatience burst from the Prince—‘Ah, by Our Lord and Our Lady, madam ! Let us determine on some course. You placed your affairs in my hands and I have been at pains to arrange them according to your desires. Your hall doors stand open for you to enter them. Other matters press upon me just now. Be pleased to alight, madam.’

Still she hesitated, hoping against any hope she could see. Don John very vigorously swore and turned his back upon her. Jervais of Bréauté approached the litter to try his hand. ‘Madam, you will be better advised not to put His Highness out of humour with your concerns,’ he said. ‘Moreover, the position is not very dignified. What can you do, what can any of us do but as His Highness and the Council have arranged ?’ Sabine was beaten. She stiffened herself, took De Bréauté’s hand and got down from the litter. Blanchmains approached and knelt again ; she kissed the hem of her robe and then rose to her feet to receive the baby from the Lady of Coldscaur. The only answer she got was in the convulsive clutch with which the little mother guarded her treasure. Blanchmains fell back ; one by one the Prince’s retinue approached to bid her farewell. Don John, however, kept his back obstinately turned upon his departing guest. He was in a very bad humour. Then the band of servants closed round and Sabine’s change of prisons was accomplished.

The Prince, with the Constable, the Archbishop of Asturias, Simon Meschamp, and their escort rode off immediately for the place appointed for their meeting with Gernulf. Before going Don John had a short interview with De Bréauté. ‘Jervais,’ said His Highness, ‘I would have you stay hereabouts, or at least keep in touch with Coldscaur. I have particular reasons to suspect a bit of treachery from Gernulf in that quarter. As you know, I should not be sorry of a pretext to get the fellow hanged. The reasons he had for keeping that little pig-head alive five years ago are good reasons for wishing her dead just now. Keep your eyes open. And if you fall in with Hauterive, for all our sakes keep him quiet till you have news of me. I shall want him before long. Find him employment—he is more harmless using his hands than his head. Let him suspect nothing of me but everything of Gernulf. Send him out killing, any one, anything ; but keep him at hand. May I trust you, Jervais ?’

‘I am your Highness’s slave in this and all your occasions,’ said Jervais. The Prince kissed him on each cheek, mounted, and rode off.

In two days’ time Prosper of Hauterive rode into the camp at Honeyborne. He had waited at Quatrepais for his messenger from Canhoe, not wishing to return with fewer men than his escort at starting had been. De Bréauté, who was a kinsman of his wife’s, made haste to obey his master’s injunctions—so much haste, indeed, that Prosper began to suspect something. He sat down, therefore, as he was and pumped his cousin

dry. What he learned from the process was more interesting than edifying. Gernulf and the Prince were compounding some villainy. It was easy to see, Prosper thought, that their interests up to a certain point ran one road ; they would separate at the death of Sabine. The more he thought of this the less he liked it. ‘What is my part in this rogues’ march?’ he thought. ‘Let me consider. Certainly they are going to murder Donna Sabine. She is in everybody’s way. I am to help Gernulf kill one Renny the more. By so doing I help Don John to hang Gernulf. Well, that I am very willing to do, but not at the cost of this poor little Renny. He has had enough Rennys, I think. But there is more ; by helping Don John hang Gernulf I am helping him also to Gernulf’s wife. That I will never do. If it were not for that brave little Countess up there I would be out of the whole business, which smells too much of blood and gluttony for my taste. As it is, I am bound to her. I will write her a letter, and at the same time I will write one to the little poet. It is time both of them were warned, I think.’

When he had done he called a man of his whom he could trust—a certain Conradin de Lamport. ‘Take a spare horse with you, and spare neither of them,’ he said. ‘Keep outside Marvilion, head for Quatrepais, and thence for Fauconbridge. Stable what is left of your cattle there and go on to Speir on foot or in a sledge. Use any disguise you can hit upon ; but, remember, those letters have got to be delivered

into the hands of the persons themselves—and separately delivered. Get them off as best you can, so that neither knows of the other's receipt. Most of all, let no other person in the house know anything. Now go ! '

CHAPTER X

LOVE AND THE COUNTESS OF PIKPOYNTZ

A SONG which Lanceilhot composed and sang to his Countess after a fortnight in her society led to a conversation between them, and to an absence of conversation even more eloquent of the state of affairs. The song itself had arisen out of their reading of Dante's book ; it no more failed of being explicit than the Tuscan failed ; it arrogated nearly as much ; it assumed a good deal. It left her somewhat dismayed at the vast consequences of a little friendliness. Mabilla found that she was twin-sister to Beatrice Portinari. Paulet did not press the comparison unduly, as you shall judge ; but he left it beyond doubt that if she stood for Beatrice Portinari he (Lanceilhot) stood for Dante Alighieri—a very liberal assumption.

When she had recovered her composure the Countess of Pikpoyntz was not clear whether she could approve. So much seemed taken for granted. She thought it a good poem, however, and said so. 'Yes,' said Lanceilhot, 'it is a very good poem. It is of my best. But the subject, you see, suited me.' Here again the Countess did

not quite know whether to smile or frown. She did neither, but looked vague instead. This gave the other a chance of admiring her fine eyes undisturbed. Then Mabilla found herself blushing and one of her hands a prisoner. ‘I need to assure myself from time to time,’ Lanceilhot was saying, ‘of the great destinies prepared for me. It is not given to every young man of no birth to speak of to find himself the lover of a handmaid of the Most High God. This may very easily take the youth’s breath away if he is not on his guard against it. To be well prepared against the essential cowardice of the body it behoves a man to use his soul as a lute. He must watch carefully the strings—particularly that which in a lute is of silver and makes the very heart of the music. He must know when to slack and when to screw taut these precious cords. So when in the song I say that “I spend my treasure to tell,” etc., I mean that I have no remorse and suffer myself never to fear the strain upon my cords. I dare not heed what I speak when I know whence comes my speech.’

Mabilla, who between her blushes and her doubts was in a melting mood, sighed at this harangue. ‘You are very positive, my friend,’ she said. ‘I wish I knew——’ She did not finish. Lanceilhot pressed her sore. ‘If you wish to know, I will tell you. Speak to me without fear.’ She hung her head and watched between her lashes the two hands, the small white one nested in the brown. Her emotion at this moment was evident; but she struggled to steady

her voice, to cool it, as it were. ‘ You say in your song that you love me, Lanceilhot.’

‘ Well, and do I not love you ? ’

‘ Yes, of course. But——’

‘ Well ? ’

‘ But you should not. I am not free.’

‘ I never yet heard that because a lady married she lost possession of her soul, madam.’

She flashed a shy smile upward at him. ‘ Is it my soul, then, that you love, Lanceilhot ? ’

‘ You know it is, madam ; you know it is.’

‘ Only my soul, then ? ’

‘ Even so.’

She slipped her hand away in an instant and turned upon him the mischievous sparkle of a child’s face.

‘ My soul is not in my hand, sir ! ’ she said.

‘ Ah, what are we ? ’ said Lanceilhot. ‘ We need a sign, Heaven knows.’ Whereupon he very gravely resumed possession. Astonishment blotted out the offence, but when she escaped the burning of her cheeks made her wonder whether the love of the soul was in truth very different from any other kind of love. She came to the conclusion that it was not, and that it behoved her to be more guarded how she did. Lanceilhot, looking to find Mabilla de Renny, presently found the Countess of Pikpoyntz. He beat himself for a time against a wall of frigid geniality, hurt himself, had the temerity to show it, and withdrew to be miserable. For two or three days they hardly spoke, were barely ten minutes together. It gave him time to compose some very desperate verses

and airs to fit them. The weather remained as arctic as his lady ; and though Speir was a large place, it was not large enough to prevent meetings between two persons who found any society better than their own. Lanceilhot, being a poet, could admire himself from a distance and find in any attitude of his matter of interest. He was, like all his tribe, his own theatre, himself his most appreciative critic. He was not prepared to leave the Countess, seeing that he considered himself on sentry duty about her ; but he was fully prepared to be exquisitely miserable, melodiously miserable, and to be entertained by the performance. Miserable he undoubtedly was, for he knew he could not live without her. Sophisticate as he would, he knew that she was not only food for his intellect. He wanted the whole of her—as much as anything else he felt the deprivation of his late acquired right of contact. He was certainly very wretched. He told himself so all day long. But poets are queer cattle, who thrive on desire and loathe all manner of meat. He knew he was growing rich on the tears he spent.

With her it was otherwise. She looked a prude, but was really very innocent, rather boyish perhaps. The tiger-cat in her was only the savagery of all healthy creatures which cannot forbear to scratch in their play, if only to prove by the shock that play it is. Lanceilhot's sudden appearance had been delightful to her for the sake (as she fondly believed) of old times. Campflops and Joyeux Saber ! How far off they seemed, how faint and estranged from her heart ! With

Lanceilhot's entry she had thought to win back the very smell of the orange blossom on the terrace walk, to hear the little Mass bell from the shore below it, the hum of bees from the limes. But she very soon found out that they had both moved ; he was older, but, as he said, incurably her servant still. And he had proved it by his deeds, by the news he brought, by his serious declaration that he should only leave her when he thought proper. That he could say this and she listen without a flush of scorn was proof that they had moved very far. She was not sure, though, that they had moved very far apart. Very keenly Mabilla probed herself upon this point. Lanceilhot was assuredly bolder ; yes, he took more for granted. He had always taken his love for her for granted—from the very first. He had not been with her a week at Joyeulx Saber when in answer to some question of hers—How sure was he that he would be a famous poet ?—he had replied, ‘ Madam, I am as sure of that as I am that I love you.’ She remembered that his pale face and serious grey eyes had been turned full upon her as he spoke. Ah, and she remembered how furious she had been. It took him two days’ cringing to appease her. But now, but now ! Eh, if Lanceilhot had grown bolder, had she grown more timid ? She grew hot as she pondered this ; either she was become more timid or—or she liked his assumptions, pardie ! Here was stuff for alarm at last ; if she liked his assumption of her hand, for instance, might not further assumption be made ? Ah, Madam Virgin, what was the

matter with her at this rate? She found herself holding her side, with a pretty fluttering beneath her hand.

The matter with Countess Mabilla very simply was that she was falling in love with Lanceilhot Paulet. She did not guess it, of course, but the taste she had had of her great Earl's love-making had enlightened her while she had thought herself disgusted finally for the business. With the dropping of his bluff authority that stout man had lost whatever hold on her he had ever had. She withdrew from him; she would not allow him to love her. But he had taught her what love was, all the same, and now she was to find out that she wanted it as much as anybody. Love for a woman always begins in trust. She had sent Lanceilhot away from Campflors to be made a man. The thing had been done, and now, as it would seem, his assumptions were to be hers. In her present deep perplexities, where she went limping through the fog, he was more than a link-boy; he was a prop. His music quieted her; it was much to be able to count upon his love, for of his integrity she had no shadow of doubt.

If he made love to her, he did it so naturally that it seemed natural, so respectfully that it must be respectable; besides, he was doing no more than he had always done ever since they had known each other; and, in fine, she liked it. During those two days' estrangement she was nearly as wretched as he was, and it was she who made the first advances toward reconciliation.

She found him in the library. He was sitting

before the table ; his head was upon it, buried in his arms. She stood for a few minutes holding the curtain, thinking what she should do. It is very seldom a woman feels any pity for the man who loves her and does her the honour to be miserable on her account. But in this case Mabilla, who had a good deal of the natural mother about her, felt a prick of it. He was only a boy, after all. She went lightly into the room and put her hand on his shoulder. This brought him up with a start. She was shocked to see how white he was ; she was touched, and found her eyes were dim.

‘Come and sing to me, please, Lanceilhot,’ she said gently. He was looking at her from under his brows, not sulkily, but as if pondering this new move. He ought to have been generous—but he was too far gone for that, or perhaps not enough—in that middle sea of love where the drowning wretch swirls between earth and heaven and is battling by instinct.

‘Lead, madam,’ he said ; ‘I will follow you.’

She led him to the turret room, which was called the Blue Bower. You had to cross the hall to get there from the library, and in the hall was Shrike. Mabilla, who had taken her friend literally, dropped his hand at this apparition, but it was too late. Shrike bowed profoundly as she passed him and did not lift his head until he heard the curtain fall upon the pair. Then he grinned uncontrollably, rolled his eyes, scratched his head and fell to muttering—‘Hoho ! Hoho ! Open weather after the frost, hey ? Down with the flood-gates, hey ? Matter for the Earl in all this. He

should look to his dam at the thaw. Much matter for the Earl, and quite of my matter.' He rubbed his hands together and went chuckling softly about.

In the Blue Bower Mabilla sat herself down by the fire, still in her mood of tender rose, strangely happy for her act of humiliation.

'Now sing to me, Lanceilhot,' she said again, and Lanceilhot stood above her and sang in savage jerks—

I love only thee—
What is that to thee ?

In this curious piece the audacious boy made another assumption. One by one the redoubts were threatened ; if he had taken this, he had been in sight of the flag above the citadel. Mabilla, however, abandoned herself to her instincts of young girl, seeing she had no philosophy at hand. She concealed her confusion as well as she could and said she did not care for the song. Would he sing her another ?

'I have no other that you would care to hear, madam,' said he.

'How can you say that, Lanceilhot ? Am I grown so hard to please ?'

'It must be so, madam. This I have sung is not to your taste, you tell me. I have no new songs different from that.'

'Ah ! You have written more like that one ?'

'Very many, my lady.'

'In that case, I think I may say I should not care for them. They seem unsubstantial to me.'

I think your songs the best which tell of what you know.'

He looked steadily at her for some moments before he spoke. Then he said, 'If I have sung untruth, there is no truth in me. If I have no truth, I am unworthy to serve you. I should leave you then by rights.'

She put her hand out to stay him. 'You take it all too seriously, my friend. Can you not learn the truth?' Lanceilhot made a step nearer. 'Will you tell me the truth?' he asked her solemnly. She caught her breath, and looked frightened.

'What do you want me to tell you, Lanceilhot?'

'Whether what I have sung you is true or false?'

'You must not ask me, Lanceilhot. How can I tell you? And I have not said it was untrue. I said that you sang best of what you know.'

'Well?'

'Well, if you know the truth yourself, what need to ask me?'

'You will not tell me?'

'I cannot, Lanceilhot.'

'You do not love me, madam?'

'Ah, you must not ask me that!'

'But I do not hesitate to declare, for my part, that I love you, madam.'

'No, indeed you do not,' said she; 'but that is very different.'

'I see no difference,' said Lanceilhot. 'I love you entirely, but not more than I have always done. I believe that you love me. If I am

wrong, you have only to tell me ; then, though I shall continue to serve you as well as to love you, I will promise to do both at a distance. What do you say, madam ?'

She hung her head ; the spirit seemed dumb within her. She played with the chain in her lap, took quick and deep breath, felt very happy and looked adorably pretty. All the while her head was at work. She knew she was beaten into a corner ; the matter was how to get out so that he should be in.

Paulet came nearer. His knee brushed her.

'Well, my sweet lady, what am I to think ?' said he, believing he had won her.

Mabilla jumped up from her cushions and put her hands on his shoulders. 'You are to think that you are a dear foolish boy in a hurry,' said she in a twinkle of mischief. She crossed her hands on her bosom, swept him a curtsey and gained the door. There she stood to blow him a kiss before she escaped.

Shrike came shuffling into the Blue Bower some ten minutes later. Lanceilhot still stood there motionless, but the Chamberlain had no eyes for him. The cushions by the fire interested him more.

'Hey, Master Paulet, but there's been a tumble here !' he began, as he pummelled them into shape. 'Ah ! and warm to the touch they are, by the soul of Master Potiphar of Egypt !' He shook his head. 'Luxury in a Christian castle. Oh no ! Fie upon it, this is intimate matter.' Lanceilhot's dawning interest awoke at

this continual gibbering. ‘By Our Lord and Our Lady,’ thought he, ‘I believe the dog insults me !’ In his irritable mood the imagination was enough. He stepped forward and had his hand in Shrike’s collar before the fellow could turn. ‘Ah, you black snake !’ cried he, ‘now I’ll teach you to play the spy.’ He hit him with all his force a great splash in the face from his left. Shrike spluttered and felt for his dagger, but Lanceilhot tripped him backward on to the cushions and pinned him there helpless. Shrike would have been happy enough to roll there, but now he turned up the whites of his eyes and began to roar. Lanceilhot stuffed his mouth with cushions and rained blows upon him till his arm was tired. Then he knelt on him and spoke his mind at ease. ‘Vile rat,’ he said, ‘I could have killed a man for less than you have looked this week past. But as I have never yet killed a man, I spare you. I think you will say no more ; but so sure as you do, at that moment and with no mercy at all I stab you to the heart. I would urge you to be clean, if I thought by so doing to put anything but more filth in your head. But in truth, for such as you there is no salvation possible. You will go on your belly here until you join the knot of snakes in hell. Up with you now, adder, and spit no more poison at honourable men.’ He let him up. Shrike, with a mouthful of loose teeth, raised his arms and wailed. Then he struck himself twice on the forehead and rushed from the Blue Bower.

Lanceilhot knew he must find Mabilla after this. Anything harsh and alien in his life made

him desperate to cling. He knew that with her he would find kindness now, if no more. No more would he ask her than to take up the relations of yesterday.

He knelt before her, encouraged by her smiling welcome. He took her hand and kissed it.

‘Forgiven, madam?’

‘Yes, Lanceilhot.’

‘Friends?’

‘Yes, good friends. Now help me. I have a letter from Gernulf.’

He sat by her and read over her shoulder. She put her hand through his arm and allowed it to be caught by his. The letter was thus conceived :—

‘**MOST GRACIOUS LADY AND MY WIFE**—We kiss your hands in all reverence of affection, letting you know that so much of our desire is happily accomplished that the Lady Sabine is now queening it in Coldscaur. We, for the settlement of so much, have consented to the urgent demands of His Highness that the matters remaining in difference should be accommodated at Speir. By this they will have the advantage of your presence and of the speedier settlement. We advance by easy stages, for the retinue is large, but in less than a week we look to greet your Grace. Attending the blessed fulfilment of which hope we commend you to Almighty God.
—Your husband and lover,

GERNULF,
Earl of Pikpoyntz.

‘What do you make of it, Lanceilhot?’

‘Eh!’ said he. ‘I make of it that the Prince is rid of the little lady.’

‘Rid of Sabine? Why should he wish that?’

‘What do you think Don John honestly wishes, madam?’

‘I think he wishes me,’ said Mabilla.

‘Therefore,’ Lanceilhot rejoined, ‘he is coming to Speir.’

‘Yes, yes. That is not hard to see. Gernulf has gained his way and Don John gains nothing.’

‘He looks to gain the sight of you, madam.’

‘To be sure he does,’ she said. ‘But he will not see me.’

‘Oh, my lady!’ breathed he. ‘What will you do?’

She flashed a proud look at him; before she spoke he knew what she would not do.

‘I will never be trafficked,’ she said coldly. ‘Though Gernulf knows as well as you do that he may venture me out to serve his ends, he does not seem to have read me any further. I will tell you how I read this letter. To buy his peace he has tempted Don John with this proffer of his. I think it shameful and will have no part in it. Do you see?’

‘Yes, madam,’ Lanceilhot answered her doubtfully. ‘I see this and think with you. But I see more, I see more!’

‘Why, what more is there to see?’

‘If Don John, as you say, seeks in reality you, and only you——’

‘Do not misjudge His Highness, my friend. I believe he seeks the Renny lands as well.’

‘Eh, but that makes my case the stronger,’ he cried. ‘Ah, Mother of God, it makes it terrible!’

He covered his face as he quailed before the black pit in front of him. Heavens! what was he saying? what was he going to do?

The girl's arm tightened on his as she drew closer to him; he felt her through every fibre of his body—the very fragrance of her made his temptation the hotter. He felt a cold dew break over him; his eyes grew misty with his despair.

She leaned her face to his in perfectly innocent affection. She too was a little afraid of the unknown foes about her. 'Tell me what it is you dread, Lanceilhot. Let us face it together. Won't you tell me?' In his white misery he dared not turn his face. She was within kissing distance and he had never kissed her in his life past. He swore to himself that if he was going to betray Gernulf he would never kiss her in his life to come. If, on the other hand, he did not betray Gernulf? Well, let him wriggle and shift then.

'I must ask you to trust me, madam,' he said at last. 'I cannot tell you what I was upon the point to say—not now, at least. It may be I shall never tell you, but this I can promise faithfully—whatever befalls, you shall suffer no harm, no wrong, no hurt. While I am with you I shall be able to protect you, weak and defenceless as I seem. And I shall never leave you unless you tell me to go. Will you trust me, madam? I have not asked many things of you in my life. Tell me, whisper it—"Lanceilhot, I trust you."'

'Lanceilhot, I trust you,' she whispered. 'Don't leave me; don't leave me.'

His love burned in him like a flame. He could hardly speak to her above a whisper. ‘I shall never leave you now, dearest.’

‘No, you must not. Lancelhot, I must tell you something. Don’t speak till I have done. When I married Gernulf it was not for love. I did it for Renny. There is a crown at Coldscaur, you know. We say that not until the girdle, the robe, and the crown are rightly allotted can there be peace in Marvilion. Sabine chose the girdle, I suppose. What she did she did for love. I came next; it was my turn to choose. I thought I must wear the crown. And I took it from the hands of Gernulf. I did not love him. I did not love anybody nor ever thought I should.’

‘Ah,’ put in Paulet; but she stopped him.

‘You must not interrupt me now. Listen only. Gernulf seemed to me a man very strong, very self-reliant. I liked well his short, stern way. So I took the crown from him. Then I found that it was me he loved more than my inheritance, and I could not give him what he asked. I had no love to give him. But he loved me more and more, and love was a curse to him, not a blessing. He needed me so much that he doted. All his fierceness, all his decision shredded away. Lancelhot, I have grown to shrink from him. He disgusts me—alas! I know what I have done. And now I think that I can never see him again, nor be in his house again, nor wear his name, nor be his wife. The crown I have put on I must wear, I suppose; but I shall have no heir to receive it and can never solve the fate. I am

more miserable than I can tell you, Lanceilhot, and that is why I have asked you to stay with me, lest if you went I should find myself without a friend in the world.' She hid her face on his shoulder as she stopped. She was not crying—she never cried—but her lover was near enough to tears. To him they came easy.

'Dearest,' he said, 'I have known most of your story since the day of your marriage. I knew it before that day was over. I knew that you were doing as you did for any end but love. I might have guessed the other part had I dared to face it out. Now that you have put it all before me, I can say : "Merciful God, this is what I have known without daring to say so to Thee or myself!"' To you now, Mabilla, I say, Is it nothing to you, this love which you have thought to pass by? Is it a small thing to you that you are loved by three men? Can you not choose between them? Must they all go by? One you will not see, the other (whom you chose) you shrink to see. What of the third? Have you no love for him? You suffer him to serve you, you listen when he speaks to you of love, but you tell him nothing. Do you shrink from him too? Are you so implacable as this? Look now, Mabilla, he asks you for no pity; he has never asked it. To you he says—"My love for you is so plain a fact that it would be affectation to hide it. It is an assumption I am entitled to make as surely as putting out my foot to walk is an assumption. And on the ground of it have I served you and will serve you. Give me nothing,

I shall still work for you. Give me everything, I can do no more. But ask of me as needing and I can give you that which no woman is the poorer of. If you are hungry, I can feed you ; thirsty, I can give you drink. If you need love, Mabilla, I am Love and can give you of my store.””

He stopped talking, but quivered yet from the stress of his own heat. The girl did not move her face from his shoulder ; he felt that she was trembling, and waited. When at last she looked up into his face it was with the wondering eyes, the moving lips, the mute appeal of a child. He stooped his head to take his wages. For one breathless moment the lips of Lanceilhot Paulet touched upon the lips, frail as a petal, soft and pasture-breathed, of Mabilla de Renny ; and then they rested for another moment, handlocked and liplocked, while the soul of each from its inner hold cried to the other, Dear heart, take heart from me. And, Dear heart, you are my Church and my Saint, cried Lanceilhot’s ; but, Love is a new thing, thought Mabilla’s, and set her blushing like a morning rose. Soon Lanceilhot was on his knees, with his face hidden in her lap, her hand upon his head, tears stealing between his fingers. This outburst gave Mabilla back what she wanted, her self-composure. Now she was able to speak to this distempered boy from the top of her new-made womanhood. She had been a woman, she guessed, for half an hour by the clock.

She raised him up, kissed him between the eyes, took his arm and paced the hall by his side.

She began to speak of rights and wrongs, degrees and callings, housewives, poetry, the fine arts, dignity of letters, matronly cares, and so on, and so on. But very soon love began to hector her again. The position was wrong for such a blessed child's play as this ; she found his arm at her side and her hand in his, herself a maid and him her sweetheart before she had time to begin her lecture. The rudiments enthralled her ; she fell melting into his arms. They were at each other's bosom at every turn ; at kissing he was no more forward than she. The hours sped on. It was time for supper. Shrike came in with a grievously wried face and they drew apart. She had the story of Shrike out of Lanceilhot before bedtime. It was the prologue for more kisses and for good-nights blissfully prolonged.

CHAPTER XI

THE MASKS ARE OFF

WHEN Lanceilhot forced the sentries of her lips he stormed the citadel ; the proud flag was his at discretion. But the glory of its virginal bravery made it for him a thing infinitely holy. He could love her with his lips, he had her heart—to pry for more was a sacrilege not to be thought of. Two days of rapt adoration, wherein they hardly ceased to kiss and cling together, passed by like a dream. If they spoke at all it was to whisper what they each knew by heart. They were lovers indeed. Lanceilhot forgot his song and Mabilla her insight ; both forgot their prudence. Shrike, therefore, had a great matter before him ; even Nitidis saw the foolishness of shamming blind. The love-making was so patent, so heedless, so entirely innocent that Gernulf himself, it may be doubted, would not have held them apart. Shrike peered and chattered, Nitidis thrilled, the servants went scared and tiptoed about the place ; Mabilla, unashamed, bared her heart and cooed, ‘My lover, Lanceilhot !’ while he whispered back between his kisses, ‘Mabilla, my heart.’ It was March,

but the weather was cold as death, a sullen frost, with angry bursts of fine snow to blind the windowpanes. No tidings came from without, not a foot fell within reach of hearing ; Mabilla and her lover kept to the Blue Bower, where all passed like a dreamy night in the South.

When a girl of Mabilla's fierce reticence once gives herself, she gives herself all in all. There was nothing her lover could have asked her in vain ; the sluice-gates were down, of a truth. And, being truth itself, she did not conceal from him the terms of her surrender, nor scruple to speak of it where it seemed simpler to speak than to be silent. When Nitidis hinted at the Earl's approach, Mabilla sighed openly. ‘Ah me !’ she said, ‘that will be the end of my dream—or the beginning,’ a saying which embarrassed the maid by its very candour. She would have dared to approach a little nearer had not her mistress saved her the pains. ‘No, no, Nitidis,’ she said, ‘my hair must be low on my neck to-day. Lanceilhot does not like it dressed so high.’ And again, ‘No crown, Nitidis. He is not crowned, and I will not be crowned.’ ‘Ah, saints in bliss, your ladyship is happy now !’ cried Nitidis, in an ecstasy over this crowning proof. ‘Yes, Nitidis,’ said the Countess of Pikpoyntz soberly, ‘I am very happy.’ Nitidis could not resist forcing a confession. She knew it already, but she must have the words of the sacrament. ‘Does your ladyship love Master Paulet, then, so much ?’ she whispered, expecting a flood of happy tears. ‘I love him utterly,’ said Mabilla, in a level voice as she might

have said she was sleepy. The maid was disappointed ; she had the fact, but not the raptures. Child of romance, the latter were the real facts for her, but she had to deal with one to whom romance had but a faint message. Love to Mabilla meant love-making, service, and surrender. Nitidis should have gone to Lanceilhot.

So for those two days the Countess Mabilla went gloriously, a misty vision of beauty and pride in her new possession. Then came the end, or perhaps the first act after the prologue. As she was coming out of the chapel from morning Mass a man who looked like a pedlar—had at any rate a pedlar's pack on his shoulders—pressed forward through the crowd at the door. ‘ May I show your ladyship some trinkets from the South ? ’ he whispered in a true southern brogue. Mabilla thrilled to hear the open vowels and caressed consonants again. She stopped. ‘ Do you come from Campflors, pedlar ? ’

‘ Nay, Excellence, but farther yet. I am from Morgraunt. But Campflors I know, and Marvilion I know, and from Marvilion come my trinkets.’ He showed his white teeth as he spoke, but most meaning was in his bright eyes. ‘ Come with me, pedlar,’ said Mabilla. ‘ I would like to see your wares.’

The pedlar followed her ; Lanceilhot followed the pedlar ; Shrike, Lanceilhot. In the hall, however, Lanceilhot stopped, guessing that Mabilla wished to be alone. Shrike, who just now suspected everything, did not know what to be at. Should he spy upon Lanceilhot or his mistress ?

Lanceilhot had thrashed him and might thrash him again. Moreover, he was doing nothing. Who was this pedlar and how did he come? He decided to spy upon the Countess.

She, in the Blue Bower, sat herself upon the cushions. ‘Now, pedlar, quick, your wares. What have you from Marvilion for me to see?’ The man for answer raised himself upright and dropped his pedlar’s leer with his pack. ‘I am no pedlar, my lady, but Conradin de Lamport of March. I have a letter in charge for you from my master. Let me give it you and take my leave. The affair is urgent.’

He delivered Prosper of Hauterive’s letter, bowed to the Countess and went. At the door he stopped, listening. ‘Madam,’ he said, ‘a part of your door has just scuttled down the passage. I may now tell you that the letter is secret as well as urgent. Farewell.’

In the hall he found three people—Shrike, Lanceilhot, and Dame Clotilda. ‘Who needs wares from the South,’ he cried, ‘let him draw near. I have to suit all tastes—dainty clothing, tender liquors, books and songs, swords and jewels, lace from Markstake, pillows and filigree very rare from Cité the royal burgh. Our lord the King himself hath drunk of this; Queen Adhelidis hath no quainter adornment than these ear-rings; all the minstrels of Campflors shall beat their brows in vain to better these rhymes. Are you a poet, my lord?’ He turned to Shrike. Shrike shook his head. ‘Devil a bit, pedlar. Realities for me—liquors now. Let me taste of

your king's drink. What Maximilian chooses poor Shrike may not pass by.'

'I am your man, Master Shrike,' said Conradin. 'Try this little cordial. 'Tis from oranges steeped and stilled in the southern sun. Avignon had the making of it, and for two nights the flask lay beneath the holy father's bolster. 'Tis of the efficacy of aqua benedicta, a sovereign cure for the stone and of a taste like angels' tears. Try two drops in water and you will cry for manna. And that I will give you, manna from Canaan, if you speak me fair. Now where is the minstrel for me?' He looked about him; Lanceilhot was listening idly. He caught the man's eye. 'Are you a troubadour, sir? Can you sing?'

'Yes, pedlar, I can,' said he.

'Here is a song about a miraculous rose that bloomed in a Campflors garden. The birds fell a-fighting who should sip of the dew in the cup of it. 'Tis a sirvente between the rock falcon and the nightingale which should sip the rose-dew, most choicely made by a clerk out of St. Save, dedicated to the—'

'Here, fellow, give me the song and be at peace,' cried Lanceilhot, throwing him an Andrew.

'Thanks on your laurelled head, my son,' said Conradin de Lamport. 'Here are the little verses tied with a golden cord. Open tenderly and ponder justly. Commune in your chamber and be still, noble poet. And now, madam'—he turned to Clotilda—'what's for you before I go to the buttery to find the maids

helping the lackeys to botch their work ?' Old Clotilda, completely gulled, began groping over the pedlar's pack. Shrike supped his cordial and eyed Lanceilhot. He, who suspected something in the wind, carried his scroll to the deep-set window, untied it carefully and found the note in the midst. He knew nothing of the hand and forgot the pedlar's injunctions. Turning his back to the hall, he read as follows :—

Good friend, if the time to resolve the cloudy liquor is not now it may never come. I conjure you add your fourth element to the brew and that with all speed. Take the pedlar's counsel and you will find a means. Take one other counsel and you will find the heart. Stay not one unnecessary hour ; the worst is to be feared where the girdle and the robe hang waiting. Let the crown go whither they are in suspense, so all may fall together. From your friend and man of iron.

He commanded himself to turn and speak to the pedlar. He knew Shrike was on the watch, but there was no time to lose.

'Pedlar,' he said, 'I find your song touches me nearly. There should be a stirring tune to this.'

'Now is it not a sweet song and a mystical ?' said Conradin, with his head on one side.

'Most excellent. Have you no more songs ?'

'Nay, poet, nay. No more.'

'This is what we call in our cant a song of two measure. There are two feet to the line. A quick measure, my friend ; but in the South we go quicker and longer time. Have you none of four measure ? Four feet to the line, pedlar ?'

‘Eh—eh !’ said the pedlar. ‘Happen I had—what then ?’

‘Shrike, I hear my lady’s bell,’ said Lanceilhot.

‘Tis of the kitchen, Master Paulet.’

‘Tis of the Blue Bower, dog !’ said Lanceilhot. Shrike had no choice, and Clotilda was no difficulty.

‘Now, sir,’ said Paulet, ‘where are your horses ?’

‘Fauconbridge.’

‘There is trouble at Coldscaur ?’

‘We doubt.’

‘We should go at once ?’

‘My lord is of that opinion.’

‘Good. We will go. And you ?’

‘Oh ! I have done my work. I can go easy.’

‘Yes, yes. Now where at Fauconbridge shall I find the beasts ?’

‘There is but one place. Cross the bridge ; there is an inn by the Logres shore, the Cross in Hand. Go into the stable and say “Goltres.” You will be served.’

‘I understand. Farewell. I go to prepare.’

‘Farewell indeed,’ said the pedlar.

Paulet hastened to the Blue Bower, and on the way met Shrike. ‘Twas the kitchen bell, Master Paulet,’ said the black, with all his teeth showing.

‘Then go to the kitchen,’ cried Lanceilhot, and pushed by. In another minute he had Mabilla trembling in his arms.

‘Oh, Lanceilhot,’ says she, ‘look at this. Tell me what it means.’ He read her letter :—

GRACIOUS LADY, MY FRIEND—The moment of receiving this put yourself and fortunes in the hands of whom you can most confide. Do as he bids and follow where he leads. No time is to be lost. As I have been faithful to my trust, do you be.

PROSPER OF HAUTERIVE.

There was matter for new embraces, in the midst of which Paulet won the sweet confession of her trust.

‘And where must we go, dear heart?’ said she.

‘We must go to Coldscaur, my dear.’

‘How?’

‘On horseback from Fauconbridge.’

‘And how to Fauconbridge?’

‘Ah! Dare we take horses?’

‘No, we must go afoot.’

‘Oh, my brave girl!’ He would have taken her again, but she gently forbore him.

‘Not now, Lanceilhot. Later, later—oh, my sweet! Have we time?’

‘We can go in four days, once we get the horses, but we have eighteen miles afoot.’

‘When should we go, Lanceilhot?’

‘As soon as it is dark.’

‘That will be very soon. Oh, Lanceilhot!’

‘My heart!’

‘May I not know why we are going?’

‘Ah, dear one, never ask me that!’

‘No, no. I am wrong. I will not ask again. Trust me.’

‘Forever!’

‘Kiss me, Lanceilhot.’ He did; their hearts seemed to swim together at their lips.

He held her by the waist at arm's length, reading the bravery of her.

'My more than queen, do you know what we have before us this night? Eighteen miles through the snow, mountain roads; no shelter!'

'You are my shelter, dear heart!'

'O God!' he cried, with brimming eyes, 'make me worthy this royal lady!' Whereat she put her hand on her breast. 'My king and my lord,' she said, "'tis you have made me worthy; you have led me, you have been tender to me, wonderfully patient—now where you go I will go, and as you bid me so I will do.'

'Ah, Heaven!' he cried again, and fell and clasped her knees. Before him then fell she and put his head upon her breast and sobbed over him and mothered him till her heart seemed on fire with aching, and she ran from him to win control. He saw no more of her till supper time, when they made all their plans.

At eight o'clock that night it was freezing hard, though not so hard as before, for the wind was rising and some light, torn clouds dimmed the field of stars. It was bitterly cold, however. Mabilla shivered in spite of herself and drew her furred cloak closer about her as she stepped on to the terrace and felt the powdery white stuff crackle under her. They stole round the house to the stables, passed through these and gained the Priest's steps to the gate, at the bottom of which they had the pass-key. Perilous going they found it. Lanceilhot, in an agony of terror on Mabilla's account, would have held her up if she had let

him ; but ‘My love,’ said she, ‘I am going to be worthy of you this night. You shall hold me when you must, but not before.’ To which he answered, with some truth, that since he had won his privilege he but served his necessities.

‘Nay, then, but you must not love me now,’ she said slyly ; and so they started like children on a man’s adventure.

Shrike—that luxurious liver—found it more shrewdly cold than ever they did. He had but visions to embrace, so his teeth clattered like castanets. Terrors, too, he had ; he was no climber, but down he went to the bottom of the six hundred steps, and over the wall by some desperate means he managed to climb. He found himself warm enough by the time he touched the road ; the warmth of his body warmed his wits. ‘Fine tales for my lord ; pretty matters for me ; worth a deserted bed. Oh, my chamberer, my minion of the bower, if you swing not for the sake of my lord’s wife, for whom shall you swing ? You white-faced little dog, you shall swing for my teeth and skin.’ He smacked his lips and peered with his lantern for the trail. It was not hard to find ; the four feet toed for the West. ‘They are for the Logres border, by Christ ! They will be for Canhoe then ! Well, well, we shall soon see. They sneak out afoot. They will not go far ; they’ll be honeymooning in half a dozen miles.’ He hugged himself with glee. ‘Pest ! Here comes the snow,’ he said presently. A light snow began to fall, and he heard the wind above him among the splintered rocks. ‘Eh !

well,' he said, 'there's but one road, and they're no more than six hundred yards before me. Eh ! but I see them now, the babes in the wood. Shrike, my boy, you may go easy. You are fat, Shrike ; you sweat too readily. Keep 'em in sight and you're asked to do no more.' So he went on muttering and chuckling to himself, and the eager snow fell steadily and covered over the marks of the six westering feet.

CHAPTER XII

THE MASKS ARE OFF—*continued*

GERNULF and his guests arrived at Speir at dusk of the day following Mabilla's escapade. Their advance messengers, with Martin, the secretary, had come in, indeed, only an hour after its desperate commencement, but nothing had been learned till the next morning. Martin, that silent, pale man, could find out absolutely nothing. No one had said a word ; no horses had been taken from the stables ; there had been none of the bustle which should precede a countess's departure ; she had taken nothing with her but a fur cloak, a snow staff—and Lanceilhot. Martin had no ideas about Lanceilhot, and Nitidis took care that he got none from Speir. Nitidis was heart and soul with her mistress ; she adored her. As a matter of fact, she was to follow to Coldscaur as soon as she could, under the pedlar's convoy, with as many necessaries as a mule would bear ; as soon, therefore, as she learned that Gernulf was coming in twelve hours' time she took Conradin aside and told him she was ready.

‘So am I, my dear,’ said he. ‘It would ill suit

me to meet these great folks, and worse accord with my master's designs if I were recognised by any. And as I am much about his person recognition is a certainty. Let us get off by all means.' Luckily for them the snowstorm was by now blinding thick ; there was little chance of their being traced. Yet by Nitidis' suggestion they went East instead of West ; for Birtsferry instead of Fauconbridge. By midday they passed through the silent streets of Querne, a little rock-built town but twenty miles from the border. 'We shall do now, mistress,' said Conradin ; 'we might get some hot stuff inside us if you choose.' But Nitidis could not rest in Gernulf's country, so they pushed on.

It was dark when the long cavalcade drew up in the great gateway of Speir—smoking horses and white riders. In the blaze of torches Shrike's absence was not noted by his master's keen eye. And there was too much to be done. Don John was in a vile humour. He hated the cold, he hated riding, he hated Gernulf. The Lords of the Council, Southerners all, had their own rages, but they had to smother them before this royal fit of sulks. It was not until the Prince had been lifted from his horse and escorted by his own and the Speir servants to his chambers, not until my lord the Constable, my Lord Archbishop and the rest of my lords had been severally bestowed, that Gernulf was able to ask of Martin, where was that black devil, Shrike. Then the match was put to the mine.

'My lord, the Chamberlain is with her ladyship the Countess.'

'Ha! And where is her ladyship the Countess?'

'I cannot tell your lordship.'

'Thunder of God, man—how, you cannot tell?'

'Her ladyship has left the castle, my lord.'

'Splendour above! What is this?'

'I was informed that her ladyship had left when I came in yesterday, my lord.'

'Who went with her, hey?'

'Paulet, the southern minstrel, my lord; the Chamberlain and Mistress Nitidis, her lady of the chamber.' Thus announced Martin as best he knew and believed. He saved himself. Gernulf jumped at once to the belief that his wife declined to see Don John. Very like his wife, he thought, and could not blame her; 'damnation for me, by God's face!' he added ruefully enough.

'Which road did her ladyship take, Martin?'

'The road of the West, my lord.'

'How do you know that?'

'There was a convoy came in from Coste Salas early yestermorn. They must have met her ladyship had she gone the East road.'

'Good. Then she is for Canhoe,' thought the Earl. He dismissed Martin and sat down by his fire to think, not what he should do, but how he could shift matters to allow of his action. He knew very well what he should do. His desire to see his wife again beset him to the point of physical torment. He was famished for the mere sight of her, the mere touch of her hand, sound of her silk robe on the floor, the mere fragrance

(as it were) of her in the house. He would start for Canhoe without fail with the first light of morning. Pondering her impetuous act, he swore he found it lovely. ‘I adore her for the mischief she has done to my plans. She has likely ruined me with Don John. May the black pest take him, but I care little for that ! My queen of two shires, my more than wife—my saint ! If I do not win again what I have lost, may I die ! By Our Lord Christ, I will live clean from henceforth. “Keep my hands—my lips that they speak no guile !” Ah, sweet Lord, what I have come near to lose utterly ! I will amend from this hour.’ He went to the door and shouted : ‘The chaplain ! The chaplain ! Send me Father Narbone !’ Then he returned, rubbing his hands together. ‘Time that our Saviour had His dues—full time, full time. God be merciful, I’ve done a mighty deal of killing. I will make full confession—the fullest—all my back-bleedings should count for something. There shall be more, much more. Ah, Jesu, to win her as I once had her ! Ah, Jesu ! ah, Jesu !’ and so on, blubbering and striking himself. To the soft-footed chaplain at his door he turned in a burst of penitence. ‘Father Narbone, Father Narbone, for forty years have I done damnable villainies—I have slain men, women and children ; I have chambered and diced, been drunken and a most devilish expert in lying. I have wedded the most glorious maid that ever was flesh and spirit, and most justly she hath me in abhorrence for what I am. Look you, Father Narbone, I have

waded in innocent blood to get her ; the reek is yet on my hands and makes my beard stink.

‘To keep her I have haled all hell about me till I am soused to the ears in hell-floods. Now, now, now, I will lie no more, murder no more, haunt no more shameful women, walk in white, mortify myself for the sake of Countess Mabilla and Jesus Christ Our Lord.’ Plump went he on his two big knees, he folded his hands, seemed to rend the ceiling with his red-hot eyes. ‘Hear me, Father Narbone. I make a confession—I confess to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, to Mary Mother of God and all the company of Heaven, that I slew by treachery Blaise de Renny while a guest in his hall, he unarmed, I in mail and armed ; that I slew and let be slain Madonna Mary, his wife, and his three young sons, Blaise, Rollo, and Morcar ; that I thus acquired his great possession and his only surviving daughter and heiress, Sabine, whom I designed to wed. Ah, and then she ran from me and I plotted her death and that of her lover, William Firmin—which latter I secured to be done. Out upon me, Father, for a ravening beast ! but attend ; there is much more coming. Further I confess as before that, to secure my most blessed Lady Mabilla, I lied and lied and lied most detestably and without end ; that, liar as I was, I knew her, and a liar she guessed me to be and thereafter would have no commerce with such as I. Nevertheless, Father, you must know—and do you, O God the Father, etc., know also—that from the hour of her most glorious kindling

in my heart I did abhor my offences ; that I have lashed my back raw, wept my eyes blind, and watched out night after cold night, praying to the Cross of Jesus and cursing the devil and his works. Finally, you shall know for this turn that I will yet further amend as you, Father, shall adjudge, doing all manner of penance that becomes a man of my estate. My sometime kept mistress, Blanchmains, I do utterly renounce—all penance will I do—seven abbeys will I found, many convents of friars, canons secular and regular, and convocations of holy women not a few. For these my sins I do confess my fault, my fault, my grievous fault, and I do ask pardon of Heaven, and of you, my Father, space for repentance and time to undo some part of all.'

Father Narbone eyed his grim patron as one petrified. A most rueful sight for him—scandalous. Gernulf, on his knees, rocked himself, tore at his beard, sobbed and roared forth his sins so that all the corridor might hear them. At his 'mea culpas' he bowed himself so that his head struck the stout floor ; finally, beaten out of sense or breath, he lay his length in his tears and panted like a dying bullock. 'God bless us all,' cried Father Narbone, 'where shall we begin ?'

Father Narbone had the weakness without the simplicity of his predecessor, the honest Sorges. Sorges, it may be safely said, would have read the edification written large over such a confession as this. To that end he would have framed his penance. Not so Father Narbone. He could

not be blind to the condition of his patient ; he could not but shrink, sympathetically, from the scandal that would accrue from any white sheet and candle business. He, and here he was at one with Sorges, was deeply shocked to see an Earl in tears—in tears and on the floor. The floor for monks, tears for ladies—but a belted Earl, fie ! ‘I do beseech your lordship to compose yourself ; I beg your lordship to be seated. A chair, my lord, a chair. We will talk easier in chairs of this—this—this sad affliction.’ Great Gernulf got on to his hands and knees, blinking like a bear. ‘Affliction !’ he roared. ‘Affliction, you fool ! I tell you it’s devilish iniquity.’

‘My lord Earl, I beg your lordship’s pardon, iniquity is the word I should have used. A chair, my lord, a chair.’

‘*Mea culpa, mea culpa*,’ groaned the Earl, banging his head again. But he finally got up, to stand rocking for an anxious time ; and at last Narbone got him into a chair, and could deal. He enjoined the use—the reasonable use—of the scourge, the hair shirt, a nail in the shoe. Holly in the bed, he thought, might not be amiss. As to open confession, it was not to be thought of. Neither God nor man would ask it of the Earl, particularly when seven abbeys were in the wind. ‘Convents of friars also, convents of women and some colleges !’ cried Gernulf. ‘I hate religious men—they work the mischief in the country ; but I will serve God now and give the devil the go-by.’ ‘That will be ample, my lord,’ said the priest, ‘ample indeed ! A most princely appointing.

So think no more of self-denunciation in the open.' 'Your pardon, my good Narbone,' said the Earl, with some return to his short way; 'I shall think much more of it. I can tell you one person at least to whom I will tell the whole beastly truth.' 'Ah, my lord, my lord!' 'Hold your canting tongue, dog!' shouted the patron. 'What do you know of knightly honour? I will never rest till I have told my glorious lady the whole of this misery.' 'Our Blessed Lady should be told, no doubt, my lord,' bowed Father Narbone. 'After her Mass to-morrow would be a good time. Or, since her festival draws near——' He stopped to find his master's eyes staring blankly upon him. 'Are you talking of Madam the Virgin, Narbone? Because I am talking of the Countess of Pikpoyntz.' Decidedly Father Narbone lacked the simplicity of Father Sorges, for to this he had nothing to say. Sorges would have thundered at a dozen earls of counties.

There remained Don John to be told something and the Council to be faced. Gernulf, with characteristic bluntness, went at it head down. To the honourable company assembled at his board for supper, of whom Don John was not one, he said without ceremony: 'My lords, our deliberations here may be shortened, for they must be dull. The Countess Mabilla has left Speir. So soon as supper is ended I will ask an audience of His Highness Don John. Pray you now fall to, my lords!' And he said no more on that head, though he did not fail to mark its effect on

two at least of his guests, the Constable, to wit, and that twinkling, sharp-faced humorist, Simon Meschamp, canon of Saint Ascolph. Simon scratched his nose flagrantly, was heard to whistle under his breath. The Constable poured himself a cupful of wine and muttered a toast to his neighbour. The Archbishop of Asturias raised his eyebrows to hear it. Eating drowned any further thought ; the long ride had left them famished.

But no one envied Gernulf his audience. Nor was it enviable. He found his Prince the caged beast of many fast days, advantaged in nothing but having a larger room for his tramp to and fro. With his nail in his teeth he stopped short so soon as his host was announced. He looked for all the world like a lean cat poised for a spring ; cold rage seemed trembling within him. But such was the Red Earl's exaltation at this time that he never faltered for an instant. He stood calmly before the door, waiting to be addressed. By so doing he tempered the Prince a little.

' Well, sir, well ; what now ? ' he snapped out.

Gernulf, measuring every word, said his say.

' My Prince, I have the honour to announce to you that the Countess Mabilla will be unable to receive your Highness. She has left Speir with a small retinue at short notice and on urgent family business. None can regret her absence more than I.'

Don John grew white. For some minutes the two men looked at each other. The younger's

breath came hissing between his teeth. There had been a moment when his hand had been fretting at his sword hilt and serious trouble imminent. But he had pushed it away from him with a clatter which brought him to his senses. His fury he could not control. ‘Leave me, sir,’ he said, and pointed a shaky hand to the door, ‘and send me up’—he hesitated for a second, thinking how he wanted Jervais of Bréauté—‘send me Simon Meschamp. At once, my lord; I command it.’ Gernulf withdrew. The moment the door was shut Don John let himself loose. Simon Meschamp, sliding into the room, found him raving incoherent curses, blasphemies, prayers (which were worse) and phrases which left no doubt (if any doubt had been) of his real aim in the whole adventure. The agile clerk took a short way.

‘Sir, sir,’ he cried out, ‘is there any woman in the wide realm worth so much breath?’

‘Ah, Christ of God! Ah, Virgin! he has made a fool of me—ai! ai! What is to be done, Simon? Beautiful! She is all heaven in flesh. There is no angel in heaven but she would show pigeon-breasted! Where is a neck and shoulders like hers! And for this butcher to maul!’ The foaming madman descended to such mere obscene mouthing that even Meschamp was sickened.

‘I perceive, sir,’ he said dryly, ‘that your Highness hath need of me more as priest than counsellor. As such I am not here. I will beg leave to retire.’ He suited act to word and made to go. Don John leapt at him.

‘I command you to advise me, Simon. I sent for you because I could trust you. Do you not see I am half mad, fellow? Where is the Countess gone?’

‘My faith, sir, I should have asked the husband,’ said the priest.

‘He doesn’t know, I tell you. “Urgent family affairs,” he said. What does that mean?’

‘I should have thought it could mean but one thing, my Prince—Coldscaur.’

‘Coldscaur? By Heavens, Simon, you are in the right of it! Then I have her.’

‘I hardly follow your Highness. On the contrary, I should say that Gernulf has her—and us too, by the Mass!’

‘No, no, Simon; no, no! I am pretty sure he knows nothing of her whereabouts. I shall start for Coldscaur to-morrow.’

‘Ah, sir, be wary. Save what breath you have left from raging for sober traffic here. Let me, at least, learn something more than we have at present.’

To this Don John reluctantly agreed. ‘Go at once, my good Simon, and pick up what you can. Send me my reader and return with despatch. I shall not go to bed to-night; it would be absurd.’

Simon went out, shaking his head. ‘A few more fires of that sort will burn the house about him. What a tinder-box! Well, the sooner alight the sooner put out. He’ll quench himself before we can beat him. Silly fool—a bonfire in a paper lantern!’

He found on mingling with the crowd in the hall that Gernulf made no secret of his intentions. His wife's business was his business, he said. He must be excused on the morrow, he was for Logres. The whole house was at the disposition of his guests ; in two days he promised to return —he and the Countess—and everything would be well. ‘Logres?’ thought Simon ; ‘that is not the way to Coldscaur. Has she gone indeed to Logres?’ He had to go farther for his news. Like a wise man, he went to the servants. In the stillroom were Dame Clotilda and Father Narbone. ‘May a poor priest come and warm his hands by your fire, dame?’ he asked, all in a twinkle of mock humility. ‘Reverend Father,’ cried old Clotilda, ‘I hope I am a Catholic soul——’ ‘I am sure of it, dame,’ quoth he. ‘Catholic soul enough,’ she pursued after a spasm, ‘to welcome the cloth on a crooked knee.’ She knelt indeed. ‘Your blessing, Father,’ said she. ‘Get up, dear soul, and bless me instead with some fruit of the vine. God hath blessed you, I can see, and I may not shear another shepherd’s lambs,’ he laughed, with a wink for Father Narbone. ‘Oh, Reverend Canon !’ said the chaplain, blushing, as he made room for his superior by the fire.

They made a very merry trio in time. Simon Meschamp told them stories of the court that alternately raised the hair or caught the breath. Clotilda laughed till she cried ; Father Narbone wiped his eyes with his cassock. Then their entertainer suddenly took a grave turn. ‘Ah, well,’ said he, ‘he’s a merry King when the fit

is on him, and my master upstairs is a merry one, too, in his day. But his day, let me tell you—and his voice grew very low—‘his day is not this day. Ah, by the Rood, but it is not! There have been words on the road, you must know—frets and jars such as a journey will always play on such delicate crockery as this we serve. But for those—pooh! a snap of the fingers! But I may tell you now, as a poor priest to a poor priest, as gossip to gossip, that my master takes your master’s affairs very ill. Ah, my word, but he does that!’ Simon wagged his head; Father Narbone caught the infection, and set to with his. Dame Clotilda grew giddy to see these revolving moons—then frightened.

‘Sakes alive, Reverend Fathers!’ she cried out. ‘Is all this pother about a pedlar?’

‘Ah, dame,’ said the chaplain, ‘that was no pedlar, believe me.’

‘Eh—eh,’ thought Simon Meschamp, ‘where are we now?’ He gave a great guffaw. ‘Did he come as a pedlar, then?’ he asked, with a shrug.

‘Came as a pedlar with a pack, and went with Mistress Nitidis as soon as he knew the Earl had been sighted,’ said Narbone.

‘But he never took you in, Father,’ said Simon incredulously. Father Narbone leaned back to laugh.

‘Ah, now, Reverend Canon,’ he said, with a fine air, ‘I am a poor priest, as you say truly, but for all that I have travelled in my day. The pedlars of Campflors or the pedlars of Cité itself,

for matter of that, speak not the tongue of Morgraunt. I knew him in three words. And what did he want with the little poet, I ask you? And why should the little poet steal off with the little Countess in the dark, hey?' Narbone triumphed, but Clotilda quailed.

'Father Narbone, no more o' that for your life. 'Tis scandal of the magnates. My lady is a Campflors lady herself, and in the West they have more freedom, I believe. Specially with the clerky.'

'Eh, dame! But you are right there. 'Tis the tongue does all the mischief down there! Let a man be shaped like a rag, he'll love with his tongue, and be loved for it. So our little lady was consoled for her lord's absence? Well, and what of that? It is not like you, my Father, or you, dame, I am very sure, to think (far from speaking) evil of dignitaries.'

Dame Clotilda made haste to protest.

'Never, your Reverence, never in the world, as I'm an aching sinner. The pretty bright little lady she is! 'Twas all pure innocence, the purest of all! Why, to see those two children you'd have thought of boy and girl playing sweethearts in the nursery corner! Hand in hand, kissing and clinging—what is that but innocence, pray? No, no, Reverence, I leave nastiness to that Shrike. The mumbling deformity! What has he done, pray you, in this but go spying? Do you think she'd a' taken him with her? Why, she couldn't bear the sight of him! And as for the little poet—ask Master Blackamoor where he got his puffy

lips from, where his hidden eye, where his teeth came out, and at whose dealing. Ask him that ! He's gone smelling mischief, trust him, trust him. And so I'd tell the Earl but for one thing. I'll do no harm to my children, as I call 'em ; never in life ! For children they are, if ever Mary had a Child for our salvation.'

Simon Meschamp, in a rapture, shook the old lady's hand. 'Spoken like a noble soul, my dear dame ! Spoken from the warm heart of a Christian lady——'

'Ah, Reverence, you overpower me. Me a Christian lady ! Never in life. I hope I know my place better. No, Reverence, but a faithful servant, and a tender old heart in her at that—but never more !'

Simon took his leave shortly after this—and knew that his praises were being sung behind him. He was announced to the Prince and admitted on the instant.

'Well, man, well ?' cried Don John, 'what have you learned ?'

'I have learned what I should have known before, my Prince,' said Simon, 'and that is to trust to your Highness' sagacity.'

Don John snapped his fingers. 'Then I am right, Madam Virgin ! She has gone to Coldscaur ?'

'She has gone to Coldscaur, sir, on a message from the Earl of Hauterive.'

'That cursed Prosper ! I might have guessed he was at the bottom of it. I should have guessed. His words to the little mule before he left. Damn him ! Go on.'

'She has gone to Coldscaur, accompanied by a lover.'

'A lover! Mother of Heaven! Who is the lover?'

'A minstrel, sir, from her own country. I did not learn his name. She plays innocence with him—a dangerous game. He has no beard, it seems.'

Don John bit his lips anxiously. 'I think I remember a minstrel. Ah, yes! A sickly-faced boy who made big eyes at her and looked whipped. Pooh! there is nothing in that. Whipped he shall be. Go on.'

'Meanwhile, sir, Gernulf, more in the dark than we are, starts with the light for Logres.'

'Logres? Ah, he'll be for Canhoe, to beat up the Rennys. The Prince-Bishop will do nothing for him. A politic man, the Prince-Bishop. As for Joyeux Saber, he hates his sister for Gernulf's sake.'

'I think he goes thither, sir, to find his wife,' said Simon. 'It appears that all is not as it should be between him and her.'

'As it should be, my good fellow!' cried Don John. 'It is, on the contrary, as it shall be. It is exactly as it should be. I tell you, Simon, she was betrothed to me. I have Stephen of Havilot's word for it. She was sold, sold, sir, to that ravisher, that cattle-raising border thief. Havilot shall answer for that some day, faith of a Prince! Eh, *mort de Dieu*, but there shall soon be an end to all this. Simon, I start for Coldscaur to-morrow. Tell my people. Let everything be

ready. And do you be ready. We will leave the heavy baggage behind.'

'Does your Highness refer to my lord Constable?' asked the rogue of a priest demurely.

'I do, pardieu!' said Don John with a bite in his voice, 'and to that gross-chopped Archbishop, moreover! Let them stay here to do the haggling with Pikpoyntz. Good-night, Simon. Fail me not.'

'Trust me, my Prince,' said Simon, and went out.

Don John walked his rooms all night. Simon Meschamp said two words to the Prince's equerry and slept like a dormouse.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PASSIONATE PILGRIMAGE

THE wind increased ; it came from the north-west, and with it came, thicker and thicker, the snow. It beat, like flying fur, in their faces, caked their breasts, clogged their knees, drove them dizzying from the track, bewildered, distressed, unbreathed the ardent couple. Soon Mabilla had to own herself flogged beyond her strength. Lanceilhot's arm went round her. Thus they laboured on. Not less ardent went the one behind them, who, less encumbered and without fear of detection, kept some fifty yards in the rear. He had been nearer than that, had been lucky enough to see the girl stop with a sudden gasp of despair and clasp at the boy's shoulder. He had seen Lanceilhot turn and embrace her, had seen and heard the kisses and the girl's sobbed confession that she was at the end of her tether.

'That's more to your taste, my dainty lady,' said Master Shrike to himself. But no ; they went on again, he supporting her. 'That will never last them long. 'Tis good to stroll the

Long Walk, but not for climbing a mountain pass,' he thought.

However, they held on so for no less than five incredible miles. Shrike himself was feeling distressed, but in the midst of it he could not but admire the heroism of that slim boy before him. He caught between the buffets of the wind the cheerful ring of his voice. 'Courage, my Mabilla ! Courage, my stout little heart ! There is a kindly eyed God behind all this mad weather. Lean upon me, dearest. So I would spend all the rest of my life !' At this, or the like of this, the girl's face would lift and lean toward him. Sure as fate he stooped his own and kissed her lips. Now and again they stopped to fetch their breath, and then the two would be face to face, close in arms, murmuring comfort from mouth to touching mouth.

'Lord, Lord ! What loving have we here !' stammered Shrike. He had half-concealed visions of some golden gleam about these two children, some shaft of light from a country wholly unknown to him. 'Is this holiness ? Is this under the law ?' he wondered—but, 'Bah ! 'tis the way of all cattle,' he added, and strained his eyes to see. Once, in the snow, they fell to their knees and Lanceilhot prayed aloud. Shrike was much confused. 'Saints, but he's paternostering in the snow ! Ah, and Ave Marying he is !' This was clean beyond him. They rose, kissed each other and resumed. In the drifts the snow was up to their knees ; elsewhere the wind tore it past them. So they went on until, as Shrike reckoned,

they had made some twelve miles. He began to pray that they might not go many more, though to fall and drowse in the snow were death certain.

He could not know the work Lanceilhot was at. No one could have guessed the boy had so great a heart. The snow had drugged his poor Mabilla; her eyelids were heavy, her knees loose, her feet dragged. For near a mile he practically carried her in his thin arms; without ceasing he talked to her; often he stopped and by his embracing caressed her senses back. He had no cordial but that, for they had entered upon the business with light hearts and pockets lighter than they should have been. His wallet contained nothing but a couple of sonnets. ‘Ah, my brave little Mabilla! Ah, my southern bird!’ he would cry, coaxing her. ‘So, so, my pretty heart—so, little bride, we are nearing. The snow lifts; soon will be a moon. Look now, I can see your dear pale face. Lift, lift, my heart, that I may win the light of your true eyes.’ He stopped and strained her to him. ‘Ah, bride! Ah, my queen of Campflors, my wild-heart Artemis, we are alone together under the sky! The sky is rude, but your bosom is warm with love. I feel it through the snow upon you. I feel your heart-beats. I think my heart is kissing yours! Come, my pure one, my unwed bride, come; it will not be long!’ And so, incoherent, devoted, trembling, eager, he ran on, and watched the wan lips flicker for a smile or agonised to see the labour of the leaden eyes. At the thirteenth mile, though there should be but five more, though the night was going

apace, he knew he had reached his limit of force. He stood, holding her up against him, and glared round the white waste. He guessed the end was near ; his lips moved as if he were praying—so he was, if it is prayer to reproach God. ‘God,’ he said, ‘Who knowest all that I know, is this well done ? I have been loyal to her ; I am working to save her and hers—and wilt Thou leave us to die here ?’ For answer his eye caught at a mound upon the moor to the right of him—a snow island in a sea of snow. ‘That is a shealing, by our Lord Christ !’ he thought. ‘We are saved, I believe.’

Saved they were. When he had awokened Mabilla by frantic love-making, when he had dragged her through the snow to what he took to be a shealing, he found he was right, and knew they were saved. The door yielded to his foot. He took her in and clapped it to. It was scarcely shut upon them when Shrike fell in a heap before it.

The black was a giant of muscles, with the heart of a rabbit. Corbet was of the other order, and the great heart had outlasted the stout legs. But Master Shrike had no intention of sleeping. He was soon on his knees to the door crack, listening with all his ears. ‘This is a story for my lord, by the glory of Heaven !’ he muttered. ‘They’ll be warm enough now—hey ? Close enough, I hope—hey ? Ho now ! what a pair ! Listen. What’s that he’s saying ?’ He caught drifts of their fond babbling—then something more to the point. ‘Five miles more in the light, my heart, and we are in Fauconbridge. We have

our horses then.' Mabilla murmured an unintelligible something ; Lanceilhot stilled it with kisses. 'We shall get them at a word,' he said. 'I go in and announce "Goltres" and they are ours. We have Coldscaur in sight by then. Now, little Jew, will you believe me? What "Goltres" may be, who or what, I cannot tell ; but— Ah, my dearest, you are pitifully tired ! Come, we will go to sleep now. Come near, come closer in to me, touch your dear lips to mine, hide your hands in my breast—there, there, there ! Now, I will snuggle the cloak over us both. Kiss me, little bride, and sleep.' 'Good-night, my Lanceilhot.' 'Good-night, my Mabilla.'

'I can dream the rest of this night's work,' said Shrike. 'Now I am for a five-mile walk in the pick of the morning. Anon I say "Goltres" and win a horse. Eh, what a night's work ! And what a tale for my lord at Coldscaur ! For at Coldscaur I shall be before my couple ; time to make 'em a bed—hey ?' The black pushed gleefully out over the snow. The fall had ceased. The stars burned in a pale sky, and the frost set a hard hand on all the earth.

'Oh, Master Gray Face,' cried he as he began the quick descent to the Faucon Valley, 'what a reckoning have I run up for you this night ! Every doit shall you pay, for every smash of my face, for every sharp word thrown. I love you not, Lanceilhot, nor shall there be much of you to love once you are at Coldscaur with your minion of a Countess. Ah, little Madam Mabilla, and you, too, I have in my trap. You are a caught

bird, my proud beauty, since with a trailing wing
you have scattered through the mire. How could
you fall so far, Lady Mabilla? Fie! A boy who
sings in a nun's parlour, a lord's kitchen, a tavern
door! And you to wear a crown! Nay, 'twill
be of iron this turn, little Madam. So proud a
smiler, so deep a bosom, so stiff a neck! So keen
cold in the eye, eh; but 'tis a roving eye—a
lascivious, beckoning eye, it seems! A full eye,
but an eye askance; a sidelong, asking eye. How
she kissed and how she clung! The hands could
not keep apart at all; palm itched for palm, finger
hankered for finger! Eh, Madam the Virgin,
what a tale for my lord, glory of Shrike! And
what a lofty perch for Master Whitey-Gray,
the kitchen ballader! Ah, and there is Faucon-
bridge!' he cried of a sudden. The black river,
the roofs and spire lay as in the hollow of his
hand.

'Goltres!' he cried to the sentry on the bridge,
and 'Goltres' again to the sleepy ostler who peeped
out of the stable door. 'Are you one, Master
Sables, or two?' 'One,' answered Shrike, 'but
another follows with the lady. I beg you speed
them.' He would not have had them miss their
road for the world. He only asked a few hours'
start—time to prepare for them, and was soon
pelting down the Wem Valley, which joins that
of the Faucon at a right angle, timing himself
to be at Renny Helm by nightfall. This would
be wonderful going, with barely time to stop for
eating and none whatever for sleep. At Renny
Helm, however, he would be safe enough. He

could spend the night there, or part of it, and be at Coldscaur by noon. The pair, riding pillion, would have to make two nights of it, and then be twenty-four hours behind him at least. It was possible that they might get a second horse, but not likely. Meanwhile the going was good, for the snowfall in the valley had been trifling ; he had had his skinful of wine and meat while his horse was getting ready ; he felt the edge of his triumph already. His beast had a long, swinging trot, which broke out now and again into a free canter. Shrike slapped the blood into his fingers as he went ; and he went whistling.

At Bifurn, where Merrow breaks away from Wem, he baited at noon ; then he forded the river above the fork and followed Merrow southward. At five in the evening he crossed the Marvilion border unchallenged ; at eight he supped at Lonestone ; at midnight he rode into an inn yard under the shadow of a hulking tower. ‘That must be the Helm,’ he said, looking up at the frowning black mass, ‘and this Renny Helm. Well rode, Shrike. I will sleep what I have earned.’ He never stirred till seven.

It was a fine spring morning when he rode out of the little town. Larks were singing, in the open pastures lambs ran for their mothers, the finches were busy in the hedges, the rooks in the elms. Not a trace of snow save here and there a line of white under a north hedge, threatening an avalanche for the primroses. Shrike rode cheerfully on, with a sharp eye for the pack of towers which he knew Coldscaur to be. By ten o’clock

he got his first sight of that grey stronghold. Marvilion is as flat as a board of green cloth, but in its very midst rises a scarred grey rock, and on the rock for a crown stands the great Renny fortress—a huddle of weathered stone, a cluster of towers deep in trees. Shrike had to confess it larger than Speir. ‘The King himself hath not a hold to match this,’ quoth he. ‘It hath a dozen towers to the bare eye; it is a burgh more than a castle.’ As he drew nearer he saw the flag floating; nearer still he could read the colour, green with a white pale. This gave him a shock. ‘Saints in bliss! That is the Renny flag! Can it be my lord is not here?’ Then he remembered that there was still a titular Renny and comforted himself. ‘There is that little minx to whom, next to my minstrel, I wish the worst that could befall—Mistress Sabine Firmin, to wit. Well, she hath mired herself. Next we have my Lady Mabilla, by the grace of God Countess of Pikpoyntz, and by the disgrace of her body food for worms—eh, eh! Who cometh next? Get on, good beast!’

He rode through the village at the foot of the Scaur. The great castle loomed before him, having the effect of a cliff threatening the little place. The Renny flag rippled incessantly in a strong breeze, but the trees at the foot of the Scaur were almost motionless. Shrike wondered how he should get in. It took him half an hour to find a way; he was bothered by this and a little out of heart when he at last hit upon a steep bridle path, which led, as he saw, to a double

towered gate half-way up the rock. He had to go up at a snail's pace—it was all very different from his pictured dash into a flagged courtyard, his shriek of 'News for my lord!' the wave of his cap, the rushing to and fro, the breathless glory of his errand. It needed a very little countering to take the heart out of Shrike, and what his scrambling up this slippery path left undone was performed at the gate. 'Ho! So you are the black from Speir!' said a sentry, disregarding his visitor's 'News for my lord!' 'You are to stay where you are, Master Black, as I read my orders, and stay you shall till I let you go free.' Shrike gasped in vain. The man took hold of his horse by the bridle and whistled for help. 'Go up to the castle and say to Mistress Blanchmains, "The black has come"—no more and no less. Bring back what is told you. Off with you now.' The messenger flew. Shrike was in a panic. 'But, my lord, I must see my lord!' he cried out. 'None of that, negro,' said the sergeant of the guard. 'There's to be no talking over this affair, as I read my orders. You'll never give me the trouble of cracking your sconce now, will you?' Shrike began to blubber. 'It's life and death, officer, I assure you,' he howled. 'Life and death it is, my patch o' colour, if you don't hold your big tongue,' returned the sergeant. There was nothing for it. For two mortal hours Shrike sat his horse while that block in a cuirass held the snaffle. It must have been near three o'clock in the afternoon when he heard a man running as for his life. 'There's your order of release, blot,'

said the sergeant of the guard. The young soldier came breathlessly out of the gate. ‘Order of the châtelaine,’ he panted at Shrike. ‘Return to him who sent you with this one word, “Sped.” Say it after me, Black.’

‘God of love, what am I to say?’ said the scared man.

‘Return to him who sent you with this one word—what is the word, Black?’

‘“Sped” was your word, sir.’

‘And “Sped,” sir, is yours. Now go.’

‘Ah, ah! But where am I to go, sir?’ howled Shrike. ‘What is this about?’

‘Why, where did you come from, fool?’

‘From Speir, but——’

‘Then back to Speir with you, ape—back to my lord.’

Shrike turned and went, as crestfallen a herald as ever you saw. One might almost pity him but that he saved one the pains; he pitied himself to the point of weeping. Indeed, his tears flowed freely. What to do he had no heart to think, yet he knew he must get out of reach of Coldscaur. That message, too—to whom was that? Who had sent him? He was to go to Speir—why? ‘Sped!’ What in the name of fortune did that mean? His curiosity was such that he forgot his misery by the time he was at the foot of the Scaur and in the village again. As he was fainting with hunger, he dared to go to the inn. There he learned of Gernulf’s departure many days since for Speir. All was not lost, then. He had only to obey his mysterious orders to retrieve the fortunes

of his cause. As soon as he could he set out again and took the great North road. Chancing to look up at the castle as he went, he saw that the flag had been lowered. A bare stick and a flapping cord were all that were left of the morning bravery. ‘What does that mean?’ he asked himself. ‘Is there no Renny, then? There was a Renny this morning, and now there is none. A stick and a string—gallows matter, that! Gallows matter!’

Shrike had recovered his vivacity in half a dozen miles, and was looking cheerfully over the misty fields with their sentry elms, when he was aware of an approaching rider who was followed by a single squire. The black, vain as a peacock, could not forbear to strut. ‘Pray, sir,’ said he, when the stranger—a dark-eyed, smiling youth, very richly dressed—was level, ‘pray, sir, can you inform me how long my Lord Earl of Pikpoyntz is like to remain in the North? I have business of a somewhat urgent nature with him.’ The youth of foreign appearance smiled very pleasantly. ‘Are you, then, of his company, sir?’ he asked in return. Shrike swept his hat from his head. ‘I have the honour to be his major-domo, sir,’ he replied—‘a great charge, sir, a weighty function for your servant.’

‘Ah,’ nodded the other, ‘I see, I see! And now you seek him on urgent affairs?’

‘My word, fair sir,’ babbled Shrike, affecting the mysterious, ‘you shall judge. I am to spare no horseflesh—I have this moment arrived with a message for the Earl, thinking to find him at the

great hold yonder—a message than which I should have sworn an hour—two hours—ago there could be no more urgent for a lord's private ear. But no ! By Heavens, sir, but there is mystery about this. I arrive at the gate, dead beat, extended ; it would seem, judging by my reception, that I am expected. Am I let in on that account ? No, forsooth, I must wait without, like a common lackey. I wait two hours. Anon, sir—now mark this—anon comes a man hot foot, saying, “A message from the châtelaine to him that sent you.” Good ! I hold out my hand for the scripture. None ! What then is my message, in Love and Duty's name ? One word, sir, I give you my troth—one word—a single word !——”

‘What was your word, good sir?’ said the stranger, watching Shrike, still smiling.

‘Ridiculous, dear sir ! The word “Sped.” What a pother for a syllable, you will say ; but I say, Hum ! Great are the designs of the great, and much business will go in a little room. Off I go, and as I go down goes the flag. What will be the next atop of the tower ? Renny is down. It should be Pikpoyntz next !’

‘It will be Pikpoyntz, honest man, I doubt not,’ said Jervais de Bréauté. Then he added, ‘Find your good lord, Master Major-domo, and bring him hither.’

‘Oh, fear not, dear sir ! He shall come. I have that to make him Trust me. Trust Shrike.’

‘I can easily believe it, sir,’ replied Jervais. Give you good evening, Master Major-domo.’

'And to you, fair sir, many happy nights and days, as I shall pray to God for you.'

The two men bowed and went their ways. Shrike rode steadily into the dark with his message, well pleased with himself. And as soon as he was out of sight the horse of Jervais felt the spur.

CHAPTER XIV

CANZON DE REINI—PART II

WHEN Mabilla woke up, which was not till ten o'clock in the morning, she found Lanceilhot standing over her with a steaming jug in his hand. He had done ten miles while she had her sleep out, had been to the inn at Fauconbridge and got a jorum of broth and some bread. Mabilla sat up. 'Oh, Lanceilhot, how good you are to me,' she said with a smile that set him glowing. She munched her bread and sipped her broth: he helped her, and soon they were chattering and laughing over their struggle of overnight.

'Are the horses safe?' Mabilla asked him presently. Lanceilhot looked rather troubled.

'I confess I don't quite understand the affair,' said he. 'There is but one horse, it seems, and when I asked where the other was the man stared at me. "Why, your fellow had it out six hours ago," said he. "My fellow!" I cried at him——'

'Why, you goose,' laughed the Countess, 'it must be the pedlar. But how did he get there?'

'Madam,' said Lanceilhot, looking at her, 'it was not the pedlar. It was a black man.'

Mabilla started violently. ‘Oh, Lanceilhot,’ she said in a voice all hushed. ‘That is Shrike.’

‘Yes,’ replied Lanceilhot gloomily, ‘it is certainly Shrike. But why is he here?’

‘How is he here?’ Mabilla said. ‘That seems more interesting to me.’

‘I can answer that for you, Mabilla. If he got to the inn six hours ago he got there just an hour after we reached this hut. Now, we certainly left him at Speir. Therefore he must have followed us.’ Mabilla puzzled over this.

‘How did he get the horse—our horse?’ she asked.

‘Ah, there again,’ cried Corbet. ‘He has overheard something, for he certainly knew the word, and, moreover, told the stableman that we were coming.’

Mabilla half closed her eyes. She spoke in a dry, desperate voice. ‘I see through this, Lanceilhot. He has been there to tell Gernulf what he has seen.’

‘Gernulf!’ Lanceilhot was very white by this. ‘Never, my Mabilla; pray God never!’

For a minute she mistook him and began to blush.

‘Are you afraid of what he will do to us, Lanceilhot? I am not afraid. I am too happy.’

He stared into her dewy eyes, astonished; then flung himself at her knees. ‘Ah, my love, my love, you do not understand. You can never think so meanly of me. I shall brave the whole world henceforward. No man will be so invincible as I; you have made me a king. No, no; but

I fear other things—for other people. Forgive me, but I cannot talk of this. Moreover, now I think—Gernulf could not be at Coldscaur. He will be at Speir by to-night.'

'Yes, yes, dearest,' said she when she had kissed to be forgiven, 'but Shrike did not know that. Shrike will believe him still there.'

Lanceilhot looked greatly relieved. 'Ah, for that I care nothing in the world. The Earl will not be there before we are. All goes well.'

'You are very mysterious, my lover. If we had loved longer I should never allow it. But I am so new in love that I can say nothing.'

'Can say nothing, Mabilla? Ah, but you can say all I care for.'

'I can say, "I love you, Lanceilhot,"' said she with her cheek to his. At this rate they did not reach the inn at Fauconbridge till noon.

They rode out of the inn yard with Mabilla on the pillion and took the valley way. Lanceilhot was now feverish to be in Marvilion; but his mistress found herself so happy as she was that she was fain to spin out the journey. 'Who knows,' she said, 'when I shall have you thus again to myself?' 'Who indeed?' thought the poor youth. Her arms were about his middle, he felt her sweet body warm to his; her breath fanned his cheek, her words ravished his ears. He might have been drunk with happiness if he could have dared let go his hold on himself. But, 'Ah me!' he cried inwardly, 'what is to be the end of all this? Can I go back to seeing her at a distance who have been blessed so near?' As

with all his trade, the discontent whereby poets grow was stirring within him. She, on the other hand, set no bounds to her joy in the youth. All the bounds were of his placing. She was his irrevocably and entire, as such maids are when once they have set Love upon his throne. Then Love takes his revenge upon the chilly place, kindling such a fire, getting such a blaze that leaves no corner of the shrine unillumed. Her haggard day was done, the rock-peregrine was manned ; now she would have gloried in every act, word, gesture which showed her his inferior. In truth she wooed him as far as she dared, further sometimes than he dared to hear. He could not subdue his lips, he could not keep her long from his arms ; but by night he slept at her door, and all his thoughts of her were those of a devotee for his god. You may kiss and clasp the holy image—no more, O Heavens ! Dare no nearer, lest you mar your own vision, wreck the light you have and go thereafter groping in the dark. So felt Lanceilhot, who never set foot near Mabilla without in thought doffing shoes and falling to knees before her. His lips were to her lips indeed ; in intention they were to her feet. So their love was in truth very innocent, very pure, very artless.

All that she had was his at discretion, because she had never given to any in her life before, nor dreamed that she could. All that he had was safely hers because he had nothing but adoration to give her. Your lewd Shrikes, leering at kisses, scream ‘Fie ! what a betrayal of marriage vows.’

The betrayal is not there. Shrike was no worse than the rest of us who see the world the colour we are of. Where he beheld a wanton wife Paulet saw all heaven in a maid's shape ; the sleek minion of his eager prying was for Mabilla a young god stooped to flesh. So through our prison bars we wonder at each other !

God knows it was all very innocent, yet the boy had his doubts. He was unworthy of his paradise, had served but one of his three years' purgatory, and that in patches ; he must shield her whom he loved but could not have ; yet he could not tell her why. The thought that she was Gernulf's, and Gernulf what he was—a wretch who had waded to her through a pool of blood (her own blood !)—this thought turned him cold in the midst of his fire of love. Then his distrust was always awake, cried at him at times like the wind in the chimneys, shuddering and wailing about him. Who could say what desperate things hung about Prosper's letter being obeyed ? God of love, how was it all to end ? He pressed on at the risk of ruin to his horse and his hopes. Mabilla pouted like the spoilt child she loved to be at this time. The weather was fair ; spring had come to Marvilion and all the snow as far behind them as the northern crags. There were flowers and springing grasses at their feet, the steady sun above them, feathered elms, tasselled larches jewelled with dew and ruby points. ‘ We might almost be at Joyeux Saber again ! ’ sighed Mabilla, ‘ and yet you drive through it as if we had never left it. Pray, will you as

soon tire of your mistress as you do of the sun ? Do you grudge the time from your books, my lord ? Am I too bare a page for you ?' and so on, half sport, half malice. Lanceilhot groaned, but kept on. 'Renny soil !' he cried as they saw the churches of Lonestone spike the horizon. 'Every blade henceforth sings your name, my Princess !'

'Not mine,' quoth she ; 'they are all Sabine's.' Whereat he paled and turned to fight his troubles single-handed.

'How will Sabine receive us, Lanceilhot ?' she went on, thinking aloud (as she could with him).

'Faith, sweetheart, I hope not too coldly,' said he, and dreaded to think how much he might mean by that. 'Lord help me, I must prepare her !' was his thought.

'She thinks me her enemy since my marriage. You told me that, Lanceilhot. But now that she is on her throne she cannot think so. Can she think so, Lanceilhot ?'

'Dear little heart,' said he gently, 'who can tell what has happened ? Why should Earl Prosper have urged us hither if all were well ? Remember that your house has many foes. Is Don John your friend ?'

'He would be more than that, Lanceilhot, if he might.'

'He loves you, dearest ?'

'He has said so. He loves my inheritance, I know. And I think I pleased him once. But then I pleased somebody else . . . in those days, my lord of affairs !'

'Wicked child ! listen to me. I must get you

to steel your dear heart against mischance. Don John loves you and your inheritance. Why do you think he gave up Sabine to the Earl ?'

' That is what I have never understood, Lanceilhot,' she said, with adorable simplicity which put Lanceilhot beside himself with love and despair. What on earth should he say ?

' Mabilla, dearest, think of it now ! This inheritance of yours is not in possession as yet. Don John may need it to be so—soon. Do you trust him ? '

' I distrust him entirely,' said she.

' You do well. I think he is a villain. Be prepared for villainy.'

Mabilla triumphed over him. ' Oh, my simple lover,' she laughed, ' now you are out ! For if he intended the villainy you imagine would he not have accomplished it in his tents ? ' She gave him a hug and a kiss for his pains. He had gained that, but nothing else.

' Don John is crafty,' he ventured again, ' and his kind overreach sometimes. He would never set his hand to such work when his head could do it better. His thought may have been that not he alone needs your inheritance.'

Mabilla answered him nothing, and there was silence between them for near a mile. Then he felt her sigh. Twice she sighed, and then, as if suddenly tired, she put her cheek against his shoulder. He said nothing, but turned and kissed her. She made no response, but after this he saw that she began to fret at delays. So he knew that he had said enough.

It was growing dusk when they reached Renny-Helm. The great fortress tower showed black against the sky, and they shivered to see it. When she learned from a chattering maid sent to tend her that Shrike had been there two days before, she came down to Lanceilhot white and trembling all over. ‘Oh, Lanceilhot,’ says she, ‘we will not stay here ; we cannot stay here.’

‘Why not, dear soul ?’

‘We should not—we should reach Coldscaur by night—it is wiser. Oh, Lanceilhot, Shrike has been here !’

He hurried to her side, put arms about her ; she clung to him convulsively ; he grew cold to feel her shaking.

‘What is your grief, my saint ? Tell me what terrifies you ?’

She could not speak for some minutes, but then it all came in a burst.

‘Hush ! I will tell you—I must tell you. The flag is down—the flag is down !’

‘What flag, dearest ?’

‘The Renny flag is down. It was there when Shrike left this place, but that night it was taken down. And since then, Lanceilhot, many soldiers have passed through. What does it mean ? I am frightened, Lanceilhot ; I am frightened !’ She held to his neck as a child will cling to its mother. He had never known her afraid before.

‘And has no flag been there again ?’ he asked her.

‘They say the King’s flag went up the next day, Lanceilhot.’

Lanceilhot changed his tone. He had been as gentle as a woman to her ; now he spoke as a man to a man.

‘To-morrow there shall be a change, by God.’

‘What do you mean, Lanceilhot?’

‘The Renny flag shall float again. Come, Mabilla ; we will go.’

She asked no more questions, nor did he say any more. Whether she read his thoughts cannot be known ; there came a moment soon when she could not mistake them. Three miles out of Renny-Helm they were challenged. ‘Who goes there ?’ rang in the dark.

‘Friend,’ cried Lanceilhot. ‘Make way.’

‘Name, friend !’

Lanceilhot rose in his stirrups.

‘Renny of Coldscaur,’ he called with all his might ; he felt Mabilla thrill.

The sentry paused ; then he said—

‘How can I tell ? You must give the word, my lord.

‘I will give you the only word that shall be spoken here,’ said Lanceilhot ; ‘I know none other.’

‘Give it, then.’

‘*Renie pas Reini.*’

‘Body of God, who are you ?’

‘I am a servant of Renny.’

‘Who is your Renny, master servant ?’

Another voice answered him, a fresh, girl’s voice.

‘Mabilla, Countess of Pikpoyntz. Make way, sentry.’

‘God save your ladyship.’ The sentry made way, and in the dark presented arms.

There fell absolute silence between the lovers. Mabilla held to him lightly and caressed him no more : he felt her greatness risen as a wall to shut him off, but must have this credit, that he lost sight of his unhappiness in the storm of hers. Did she guess what he knew ? He knew as certainly as if he had seen it what had made her Renny of Coldscaur. If she knew it also, Heaven be good to her, what a sea she must be riding now ! Yet he could not speak. She was royal now ; a young princess entered upon her kingdom. It was not for him to speak uninvited. And she did not invite, made no sign or motion. So in silence they entered the village below the Scaur, each folded in thoughts apart.

At the foot of the rock they were challenged again. Again Lanceilhot declared the title of his lady, pronouncing, as he felt, his own banishment. When they were past he dismounted and led the horse up the way. So they came to the gate. Lanceilhot rang the bell boldly, with immediate results. The side postern opened, the guard came out.

‘Who is this at such an hour ?’

‘It is one for whom no postern will suffice. Set open your gates and turn your guard out.’

‘You speak as if the King were coming in, young gentleman.’

‘I am a Queen’s man,’ said Lanceilhot.

‘Where is your Queen ? Who is your Queen ?’

‘She is here. She is Renny of Coldscaur.’

‘Ho, by the Mass ! Is this your news ? Let me know the name of your Queen.’

‘Mabilla, Countess of Pikpoyntz.’

The man sent his lantern beam on high. It revealed a pale, set face, and a pair of eyes fixed coldly toward the height. A flash sufficed him.

‘Guard, turn out !’ he called.

The doors folded apart and Countess Mabilla set foot upon her demesne. An escort marched up to the castle at her side ; Lanceilhot, bare-headed, kept his hand on the bridle.

In the pillared porch, under the wolves that bear the Renny shield, stood Jervais de Bréauté, also bare-headed. Mabilla gave him her hand to kiss and then he led her in. Lanceilhot followed behind. He was but a lackey now. So they went to the great hall—a vast, echoing place all black oak and silver sconces. From the rafters hung torn banners ; there were skins on the floor, arms and armour on every hand. At the farther end, under a gallery, was a high dais with an ebony carved throne. Thither Jervais led the Countess, and so soon as she was seated he again did homage on his knee. Then he rose and began—

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘you see that I admit your claim without more proof than you care to give me. I have never been privileged to see you before, but I have known many of your family and may say that you carry your insignia upon your face. In your absence, as my duty is, I have taken possession as of a vacant fief, and in the

name of the King. To-morrow I will formally deliver seisin and take the fealty due to the Crown, but till then I am what I shall hope always to be, your servant. Let me crave your ladyship's commands.'

Mabilla looked keenly at him for a little time without speaking. Then she said :

'When did you come here, my lord ?'

He answered her, 'Two days ago. I should have been here sooner.'

'You were—too late ?'

'I was too late, madam.'

'Tell me what you know, my lord.'

'Madam, I obey you. I am here, as you may know, as lieutenant of His Highness Don John of Barsaunter, who is in the North with the Earl of Pikpoyntz, your husband. When by the terms of the treaty the Prince, my master, had agreed to surrender the Lady Sabine to my Lord of Pikpoyntz and to journey with him to Speir to treat of other open matters, he was not altogether easy in his mind as to the nature of the welcome the lady would receive. He appointed me his lieutenant to safeguard her interests. My Lady Sabine, however, kept close house (or was so kept) and I could get no speech with her and very little news. I stayed in the purlieus, and two days ago, as I was riding within a few miles of the castle, I chanced to meet a horseman.'

'Who was this horseman, my lord ?'

'Madam, he was a negro. He declared himself Chamberlain to my lord, your husband, of the name of Shrike.'

She pressed her lips together and bowed, not trusting herself to speak. Jervais continued.

‘From what I learned of this man I determined to go to the castle. I went in force. It then became necessary to take certain measures and to communicate with my master. This I have done, as my duty was.’

‘What measures did you take, my lord?’ she asked vaguely, half in a dream.

‘I have put the châtelaine of the castle under close restraint, my lady. The facts warranted it. The negro told me——’ She put up her hand; there was a startled gleam in her eyes by now.

‘I cannot hear you, my lord. Let me go now.’ She rose, then put her hand to her heart. ‘I am not too late?’ she muttered.

Jervais shook his head. ‘I will lead you, madam, to the door. She is in the chapel.’

Mabilla followed him. As she stepped down from the dais she turned her head and looked at Lanceilhot, for the first time since she had declared herself. Lanceilhot followed her at once.

The chapel—a soaring, slender-shafted building, with fanwork upon its roof and an apse deep and pointed—seemed full of light, withal it was hung with black velvet. The altar was shrouded also, and all the silent Rennys stretched in mail upon their tombs wore veils of crape. In the midst, upon an open bier, lay little Sabine, ringed, as it seemed, with a hedge of flame—twelve great candles about her bed. At her head and again at her feet a grey nun knelt, praying before a little altar and its silver Christ. Sabine lay with

folded hands upon a white bier, about which ran the wide purple hem which the Rennys claimed to have brought with them from imperial Rome. She wore a most singular robe, in shape like a priest's cope, colour of straw and spotted with what appeared great blots of blood. A morse fastened it at her throat, but her praying hands thrust it open ; you saw it was lined scarlet, and that for the rest she had a white linen gown held at the waist by a broad purple belt. On her bosom was a crucifix, at her feet a golden wolf, which kept couchant guard over a coronet and escutcheon.

None of these things saw Mabilla at the time, nor Lanceilhot ; all their looks were frozen to her face. So grey and stern lay the little maid, the lids of her eyes so scornfully drooped ; her nostrils, not pinched as generally befalls the dead, seemed filled with the breath of her pride ; her rigid mouth seemed carved out of flint. There was no peace upon her and yet no unrest. She looked as one for whom is neither happiness nor sorrow, but only rooted resolve to endure. ‘I was born to speak and to cry out, but, behold ! I will make myself dumb ; a heart had I, but I dried it to be rock. I froze my tears that they should never start ; I cut out my tongue lest it should play me false. I know where my strength lay, for I had seen where was the weakness of my house. I said, What I have seen I will never speak, what befalls I will let come down. I will never bow my head, nor shall any one ever know the secret things of my soul. And all this I will do to the last hour of my life,

so that none shall say, Here was a Renny who flinched at the proof.' And little Sabine's creed upheld her in her last hour ; for she saw the steel come down, nor ever blinked her eyes. So much they learned afterwards ; some of it, at least, Lanceilhot read by the sight of that beautiful, inflexible face.

He turned his wet eyes to his lady Mabilla and saw no wetness in hers. The likeness between the living and the dead was extraordinary, but now that both were pale you saw how much of the dead child's charm depended upon her glorious colour, for now Mabilla was the more beautiful. Her face was not so round—Sabine never lost her child's look ; it was more alert, finer carved, more eloquent of the spirit within. And then her eyes were not shut ; they were wide, full of light, fierce and far-searching, relentlessly pursuing the terrible truth into the dark corners of the earth. He knew here was another indomitable Renny who would face out all hell and its terrors for the truth's sake. Kneeling apart, he watched her. She was praying, he saw, with her lips ; but there was no undercurrent—she was not praying with her soul. That seemed to be beating with its wings at her bosom, seeking vent to escape and cry its anguish in the open. Lanceilhot was distressed at her distress. He saw her drive her hands inward upon her breasts as if to crush her spirit down, and he thought, 'God, send help to me from Thy holy place that I may help my lady.'

There were none in the chapel but those two

and the grey nuns. Lanceilhot rose from his knees and dirged Sabine. The second part of his *Canzon de Reini* rose clear and strong to his lips :—

The rune of the Robe
Rightly I read.
'Twas wove for the Wolf
By the Sisters, the Singers,
Far in the gray
Dusk of the dawn,
When the sea shiver'd,
And Eudo took root in the rock.

The grey nuns prayed on ; the kneeling girl held her breath ; Lanceilhot chanted in a voice low and thrilled—nothing vexed the solemnity of the place or flouted the repose of the dead.

‘Renny must rue what Renny has wrought,’ was the burthen of his chant. Upon a field of blood fell a tear from the Mother of God—mother also of sorrows. It was a seed of sacred suffering ; such a tear she had let drop upon her Son’s brow as she wailed over the wounds the thorn-crown had made. ‘The woe shall be eased ; watch you this flower. The robe of ruth fashion it fair.’ So cried the Mother of God and Sorrow to her three handmaidens. And so they wrought at the robe. Followed a description of it, for which he had only to use his eyes. There it lay, the straw-coloured silk vesture, splashed with blood ; and it served as a pall for the dead flower within it—the child whose pride had bid her watch her blood ebb from her and say no word. She had obeyed and given her blood, moaned the singer. Given ? What had she not given in God’s name ? She

had given father and mother, brothers and estate, and never faltered ; she had squandered her heart and made no sign, her youth, her bloom and her beauty, and not fainted at all. She had lived by spending, and now she was herself spent. Was this no witness ? Witness to the stuff of the Renny fibre, the length of Renny hold, its Roman grip in the teeth of good report and evil report ? Had she not earned the robe ? ‘ Ah, by my soul,’ cried Lanceilhot, ‘ so far the curse is laid and at rest. So fall the girdle and crown ! ’

By the time he had done Mabilla had got up. He saw her go forward and look closely at her dead cousin. Then she turned pale as death and pointed Lanceilhot’s looks to the pall. ‘ The robe, the robe ! ’ she whispered. ‘ Oh, Lanceilhot, she wears the robe ! ’

‘ ‘Tis what she has earned, poor soul,’ he said.

‘ Come, Lanceilhot,’ Mabilla said ; ‘ let us leave this place.’

They went out together ; in the antechapel she fell sobbing into his arms. ‘ O my heart, my heart,’ she cried, as if strangled. ‘ I can bear no more.’ He said what he could to comfort her, kissed her cold face, pressed her close, chafed her frozen hands. He could hardly stem her panic. ‘ I am frightened, Lanceilhot, I am frightened. What have I done ? I have done a great sin,’ she kept saying, over and over.

But he would have none of this. ‘ You are spotless, a saint ; no other can be so royal or do so queenly as Mabilla.’

She shook her head and moaned on : ‘ No, no,

no ! Take it from me. I am sinful to wear it. I am a fool, a coward—I dare not face it all out. I have never dreamed such terror as this.' And then her tears came, and she clung piteously to her lover, imploring him not to leave her.

'I will never leave you, my heart,' he cried, in desperation of making her believe what he knew so well.

CHAPTER XV

MABILLA DISCLAIMS THE RENNY RIGHT

SHE brushed the tears away from her eyes and composed her pale face before she left his arms. Indeed, she did not leave them, but leaned her head upon his shoulder and her weight upon his supporting hand. So she remained for a few minutes, while he hardly dared breathe lest he should disturb her peace. Stirring then, she began to murmur of what remained still to her to do ; but she spoke as if in sleep, without opening her eyes.

‘I must know all—I must bottom it to the deepest. Oh, Lanceilhot, I must, I must.’

He could not deny that ; yet dared not as yet break his engagement to Pikpoyntz. Except in her direst need he was not to tell her what he knew. That hour was not, he judged, fully come, though it was coming.

To her weary word, he could only clasp her the firmer. ‘Yes, yes, dear soul, it will be well. It is cast upon you now ; you will not dare to falter.’

‘How shall I do it, Lanceilhot ?’ she asked

him, and opened her blue eyes and looked up into his face. He lifted and kissed her fingers.

'It will be horrible for you, and yet you will do it. I think that you will see the woman in the tower.'

She looked out widely. 'Ah, Blanchmains ! Yes, yes, I must see her. Go, my love, and get me the key of her prison. I will wait here for you.' She sat, a forlorn little Renny, in an embrasure of the wall, and he went on his errand. He had some difficulty with the Lord Jervais of Bréauté, who would not recognise him as any possible official of a great lady. But Lanceilhot's way was none the longer for its quietness.

'Her ladyship is worn with fatigue, my lord, and sent me because I was at hand. If I return to her with your refusal and she comes to you in person, she will thank neither of us, and will have the key some ten minutes later than she need.'

Jervais said, 'I will bring it her myself. Follow, sir.' Lanceilhot bowed and stood aside for him to pass. Mabilla received it from him without seeming to know that he was there. He suggested his presence to her ; she smiled and bowed her head. When he went on to offer her his escort she took Lanceilhot's arm.

'I need no escort in my own house, my lord,' she said. Her choice was patent.

At the foot of the tower she clung for one moment of weakness to her lover. This set him despairing. 'O God, enable me ! O God, spare her this—if it be possible !' So he braced her by his own weakness. She stroked his face.

'My brave, my patient, my generous great heart,' she called him, and he adored her for the loyal fibbing. 'Stay here for me—and pray that I may be strong.' She left him, turned the great key, entered, and shut the door behind her.

Blanchmains, crouched upon the straw, was too far gone in despondency to move. For twenty-four hours she had padded to and fro, or raged by the wall. She had cried, stormed, moaned her anguish. Her nerves seemed by now to have snapped. Suspense had outdone itself; now she was numb and inert. Out of her dead face loomed her blank black eyes; they glittered as those of the dead do not; nothing else about her betrayed the semblance of life. Yet she had all her wits—it was her nerve that had left her. She watched the door open, saw this unknown enemy—for enemy to her must be all persons but one—enter it, shut it again, turn the key. She saw the newcomer, a slight, elfin, delicate figure, advance as to a gay adventure, lightly and suavely, and stand before her, looking and pondering. Unblinking as an owl, incapable of motion, she absorbed Mabilla with her eyes. The little Countess surveyed her for some minutes meditatively, as one might consider an unwholesome but curious growth. If one might have judged by her fluttering nostrils, she was judging by the nose as well as by the eyes. But in truth Mabilla had every sense at work, including that sixth which women have and men lack, that inner sense which says, *Here is something horrible.*

'You are Blanchmains,' she said presently.

'You are from Speir. He sent you here.' She could not bring herself to her husband's name.

Blanchmains shifted a little in her form of straw and moved her dry lips—never her glooming eyes.

'He sent you here to keep Donna Sabine. You had her murdered.' Mabilla's face was white and tragic, her blue eyes burned. She spoke short and terrible logic—and Blanchmains replied to it.

'I did as I was told,' she said, speaking as if to herself.

'Who told you to kill Donna Sabine?'

'He sent Shrike. That was to be the signal.'

'He did not send Shrike,' said Mabilla. 'Shrike followed me to this house.'

Blanchmains had no answer to that; but she shifted her looks. She now followed the cracks in the pavement, up and down and round about.

'Do you know who I am?' Mabilla asked her.

Blanchmains, still at her tracking of the lines, said, 'You are a Renny.'

'I am Renny of Coldscaur,' said Mabilla. 'And I am Countess of Pikpoyntz.'

Blanchmains, who had guessed as much—for now her wits were hard at work—picked at the straw and put a strand in her mouth and wrung at it with her teeth.

With clear eyes upon her, frankly curious, Mabilla pursued her questions. 'Do you know yourself who you are?'

Blanchmains opened her eyes a little wider, but not to read her questioner's. Even so, the black iris appeared to swim over all.

'I will tell you who you are,' Mabilla said. 'You are yourself a Renny. I have this for you from your father.'

She held out a little packet tied with white cord. Blanchmains looked at it, but would not touch it. Mabilla dropped it beside her in the straw. Her voice now had a worn note in it, as though it had become frayed.

'You have done after your kind,' she said. 'You and I belong to an accursed race. From the beginning we have hated, fought, and killed each other. Father and son, brother and brother, cousin and cousin—liars, murderers, traitors, all of us. I hate the name of Renny; it is my shame and my punishment. But now I have learned wisdom, if it is not too late. I have learned wisdom, but not from a Renny. You, who have slain your own kin, might be slain by me. I will never do it. So soon as your lord comes you shall go free.'

Blanchmains shivered. 'Not with him,' she said. 'Not with him.'

'You and he have been partners in this vice,' said Mabilla, 'and together you shall face it. My people will take the pair of you to the border, and this country shall be quit of you.'

Blanchmains stood up. She looked like a visitor from the dead. 'You are a good Renny,' she said. 'You murder choicely. You give me to Pikpoyntz to be dealt with—and think you wash your hands.'

Mabilla nodded her head, but her eyes were now irresolute; they wandered. Blanchmains laughed and took a step forward. 'I could

strangle you with my hands,' she said, 'as I strangled Sabine.'

Mabilla looked at her. 'You could, but you will not. You have strangled enough.'

For a moment the woman hovered, shuddering on the edge of murder. Mabilla, however, was watching her own conscience for a sign. There came hasty knocking at the door and both of them looked up.

'Madam, madam!' they heard.

Mabilla went toward the sound. 'Well,' she cried, 'who calls me?'

'It is I, Frélus, madam. They report my lord upon the road.'

Blanchmains shivered and drooped her head. 'Now I dare not kill you,' she confessed. Presently she began to laugh wildly and without mirth. 'Shall you send him to me here? He will do your work well in this quiet place.'

Mabilla had made up her mind. 'You shall go in peace. I will shed no blood if I can help it. I dare not.'

Blanchmains curled her lip. 'A Renny who does not dare! Are you the bastard or am I?'

Mabilla's eyes were grave. 'I will be Renny for a very little longer. I have a better name to choose.' She opened the door, taking both hands to the key. Outside stood Frélus, very stiff, and Lanceilhot, very anxious. Mabilla faced them staidly.

'Frélus,' she said, 'let this woman be taken to the border under escort, and there set free.' But Frélus eyed her.

'That may hardly be, madam. The King's men are in, by whose warrant she is here. And my lord himself—when he comes——'

'Let my lord, when he comes, answer for what is done in his name,' said Mabilla. 'And until he comes let me answer for what I do. Let the thing which I order you be as I order it. How far distant is my lord?'

Frélus told her that an advanced post had ridden in to report the Earl six hours distant. 'He should be here by midnight.'

'Time enough,' said Mabilla, suddenly grown white. 'Let him be admitted when he comes.' She turned to Blanchmains. 'Follow me,' she said. Frélus, biting his lip, stood aside, as the prisoner shuffled out of the cell and followed the Countess. Lanceilhot watched them fade into the darkness of the corridor.

Presently came Nitidis to him, asking the whereabouts of her mistress. The honest girl had come direct to Coldscaur of her own motion. Lanceilhot could have kissed her—indeed, I fancy that he did.

CHAPTER XVI

LANCEILHOT SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

INTO the midway of that night she lay wide-eyed and quaking in a Renny bed, while one by one came the Renny ghosts about it and mouthed old woe and lifted bloody hands in testimony of woe past and to be. The great house seemed full of unrestful noise ; rattling of shutters, speeding, hurtling wind, racing rats, flacking arras ; but most of all the memories with which it was haunted made it unquiet. The fire on the hearth, too, leaped fitfully and played tricks of light and shadow, or it gushed outward into the vaulted chamber as the tempest smote without upon the chimney-stack. They used to say that however puddled lay the summer air over flat Marvilion, up there, atop of Scaur, there was always a rustling wind ; that at night you heard it howl and shriek, how still soever the folk might be lying down in Renny-Helm.

Nitidis, good girl, lay on her back beside her mistress, breathing as short and hastily as a child in first sleep ; by the light of the fire Mabilla could see her flushed, pretty face, with its pure mouth and dimpled cheeks. She had been glad

enough to find her when at last she came out from her task work—and the maid and she had chosen to keep together. But far and fast travelled her mind—vexed by the Renny ghosts, scorning them for their futility, the little, dry and barren fruitage they got off their blood-fed acres, but not fearing them, nor finding them worth her loathing. What! A crown of gewgaws and a splashed silken shroud! And for these they had hated and slain each other. Foul, foul, besotted, shameful race! Out there in the dark moved one of the last of them—Blanchmains, the bastard, whom she had scorned too much for vengeance. She had taken her into the open, given her a seal ring for safe conduct, and said, ‘Go in my peace, if never in your own.’ And the white and black ravening woman had slunk out into the dark. Let her go. It was not Blanchmains who kept her awake. Nor was it little dead Sabine down there, chilled in death, of whom she thought; nor of Pikpoyntz, on his road to her—of him not at all, so deep was the certainty she had that he and she would never see each other again. The man was coming straight to his punishment, marching headlong into a trap. He would get none from her. She cared so little for him and his vileness that she was not even concerned to be sure whether he could be punished or not. So surely as there was a God in the sky, so sure was his punishment, but it would be none of her dealing.

Most of her thought at the first was disrelish of herself and the foolish part she had played.

To have sold herself to this beast—to have given him the flower of her youth—and for what? For the Renny crown and to give Sabine the Renny robe. Every train she pursued brought her back shamefast to that. And so she tossed and shifted about and had a burning head and stone-cold feet. By strong effort she calmed herself, turned her thoughts to Lanceilhot. She leaned with him again on the terrace at Joyeux Saber, looked down to where the myrtles and ilexes dipped into the violet sea. She felt her bosom press upon his arm as they paced the Speir corridors, or held close talk about what she used to forbid him, but what she now must for ever hear. That same arm of his upheld her again through the deadly drifts and guided her through the blinding storms upon the pass. She lay upon his breast in the shealing and went to sleep with his lips against her own, her breath and his mingling. ‘My lord and king, my lord and king! Ah, take me from this wicked bed, dear Lanceilhot.’ With his pale, keen face touching hers, with his wise eyes quelling the enemies of her peace, she fell really and smilingly asleep.

For how long that may have been she could not know—not more, probably, than an hour. It was Lanceilhot’s real hand upon her hair that woke her, his true voice that opened her ears. She looked up smiling at the dear sound, not surprised. By the light of the taper which he held she saw him standing above her. He looked very decisive, very white, very grave—but kind, as always in these days.

'Dress yourself, my heart, and come out to me in the corridor. Dress yourself, and bring a cloak—but quickly.' Then he left her.

She obeyed him immediately, without wonder or reflection. There was that in his tone which she had accustomed herself to accept. She bound up her hair, put upon her the gown she had worn overnight, and came out to him. He was standing at the door, shading the taper with his hand. From far below stairs came the noise of armed men trampling the flagstones, now and then a sharp command. Mabilla kept her eyes steadily upon Lanceilhot, who surveyed her by the light of the taper, smiled and shook his head.

'Go back, dearest love, and put on some other gown. Take one from Nitidis—anything that is not your own.'

She laughed. 'Oh, Lanceilhot, what are you going to do with me? I can never wear her gown.' She looked down at herself, then up at him, caught his looks upon her, and blushed. It was true enough. Nitidis was a slight girl, drooped in the bust—and she, Mabilla, with the sharp bosom of Hebe, the life-giver. But now Lanceilhot showed impatience.

'Ah, my life!' he said, sighing out his fret, 'stay not to think of these things. Quickly, quickly, for the love of the Virgin Mother.' Without a word she stepped back into the room, slipped off her brocade, and on the blue linen frock which became Nitidis so well. She pinned it across her breast with a brooch, and belted herself with a broad leather girdle which she took

off a table at hand. Without looking at it, she clasped it about her, picked up her cloak and came out.

Lanceilhot took her hand, and knocked out the taper. He led her to the far end of the corridor, down a narrow stairway and out of a window on to the leaden roof of a bay. Sheltered there from the wind, the night showed calm and starlit ; the air struck hot upon their faces as they came into it. He spread his cloak for her to sit upon, covered her with her own ; he sat beside her, felt for her hand. Clasping that close, he spoke to her.

‘I am to tell you what I thought I never could—and indeed I promised that I would not, except in time of your peril. And I judge this to be such a time, my dear. For your kinswoman lies dead below you, stiff and lonely in her shroud, and her slayer is in the house. Pikpoyntz is here. They have let him in. Therefore I tell you because I must.’

She sought for his face, could not see it, but leaned her cheek where she thought it must be. ‘Tell me, Lanceilhot,’ she said, whispering. ‘Tell me. I am not afraid of anything with you. Blanchmains strangled Sabine—I know that.’

‘But Pikpoyntz, your husband,’ said Lanceilhot, ‘slew Blaise, her father, and Mary, her mother, and all her brothers. Donna Sabine herself told me that. She was witness and saw it done, and she only remained alive of them all.’

Mabilla kept very still. She said quietly, ‘I

have been sure of that—since—since you came to me at Speir and made me love you, Lanceilhot. Love made me wise. And it was Pkipoyntz who bade Blanchmains wait for a sign to kill Sabine. And it was Shrike who gave the sign, though he did not know it. And now I have let Blanchmains go, because she is my cousin, a Renny, and I could not be as all the Rennys have been from the beginning—because I love you, Lanceilhot.' She pressed against him, clung suddenly to him and convulsively, and sought his lips.

He held her close in his arms, but lifted up his face to the sky, and cried out upon her race. 'Ah, foul, foul are the ways of this wicked house! Shame will it be to the fairest work of God if you set your foot upon the steps of the bloody throne! How have you sped in your quest of it but sorrowfully? How can you fare in your hold of it but shamefully? And what have sorrow and shame to do with you, O purest of the pure, O gay and dauntless, O busy with charity and fair seeing, O queen of pleasant courtesy and sweet breath? Look out, my soul, look out at the whitening earth, thrilling now to the dawn! All this fair heritage is ours if we will, none the worse that it is heritage also of all good dealers, who love and are not afraid of honesty. What will you do here, in this rock-bound hold, but heap misery and clog your brave, true eyes? What may we not do out there in the good green world, together, you and I, together, my Mab, at peace under the stars, at rest under the shadow of the

kindly clouds ; loved by the sun, kissed by the wind, friends with the patient and the proudly meek ? Do you choose—you, O love wise—for the Renny crown, forged in sin, anointed with blood, maintained by murder ? Will you, sweet and temperate woman that you are, exchange your birthright for this vile inheritance ? Ah, by my soul, but you shall not ; for you have made me man, and seer, and a prophet of the Holy One, and in His name I bid you be done with sin and shame. Come out with me, my soul, come out with me into the fair world, and let Love be your guide. He, that gracious Lord, will keep us ; we shall be safe under His feathers. Leave the blood-rusted crown to who dare pick the thing up ; forswear the gouted robe—that shroud of unhappy death. The girdle is yours, my blessed one—the girdle of a man's arm ; for that is the way of innocence and peace for fair and good women. Look, look, my Mab, the dawn is here ! All the earth lies washen and fresh gilded, and the sun, the life-bringer, rises from the sea. And below, within these wicked walls, men stalk each other like lions in the desert, to win crowns.' He pointed to the eastern sky. There glowed and flushed the herald of the new day. Mabilla lay back in his arms, with parted lips and happy, glimmering eyes. He stooped his head and kissed her.

Presently they talked of what they should do. Lanceilhot was for instant departure. He had money enough, he said, to take them to Maint-songe, the King's city. There he should settle

her in some convent and embark in scrivening. With that and his learning and his poetry he seemed to have no doubt whatever of success. And Mabilla had none—or she showed no flicker of it in her trustful eyes. Love, it seems, had usurped her mind with her heart and ruled as a despot.

‘We will go, then?’ he asked her. ‘You trust me?’ And she laughed at him for asking such foolishness. He raised her and drew her back after him to the stairway. He would have descended, but she stopped him.

‘Lanceilhot,’ she said, ‘we cannot leave Nitidis here. She is good and she loves me. She came here for my sake. We must not leave anything good in this hateful place.’

He stared at her for a moment, fear in his eyes. But then he agreed.

‘Yes, you are right. We must get her, whatever it cost.’ He believed that in ascending the stair they might never get down again, but one is not a poet for nothing.

At the end of the corridor they found Nitidis, blanched with terror, in her shift. When she saw them coming she shrieked and ran to them. Mabilla took her into the chamber, dressed her, cloaked her and brought her out.

Lanceilhot, who had been back to the spiral stair and half-way down it, was waiting for them, out of breath. ‘No way down—that stair,’ he said. ‘I believe we must make a rope and go by the window. Else we are trapped.’

‘No, no,’ Nitidis told him. ‘I know another

way. Follow.' She took them without faltering by fresh and endless corridors, whose every portal made the blood stand still, into a great, long and empty gallery, all hung with flapping arras. She felt along the wall. 'Here should be a door,' she said. 'It was shown me yesterday by a priest. Ah!' She had found it. 'Come now,' she said, 'I know the way.'

When the Earl of Pikpoyntz stood, sweating from his travel, bare-headed in that hall where six years before he had done his beastly work, he sent Frélus to find his Countess. Frélus went away and remained away. He presently came back and reported that her ladyship could not be found, but that in the meantime the late Madam de Renny lay in state in the chapel, in the Renny robe.

His jaw dropped. He looked horrible. 'Dead!' he said. 'Who did that?'

They told him Blanchmains, who was now under key.

His eyes burned in his white face. 'Bring me the key,' he said. It was brought him. He swung his cloak back free of his arm and went alone down the corridor. There, in the midst, he met the Lord Jervais de Bréauté with a company of the King's men. But there was no fight left in him. The Bull of the North had gored his last.

Out in the open country, in a budding shaw, Lanceilhot and Mabilla stood handfasted, and watched the sun burn over the rim of the world.

CHAPTER XVII

CANZON DE REINI—PART III

THE three fugitives had walked a long stage through drenching heaths and woods, whose quietude was broken only by the drip of falling dews ; the promise of the dawn had been blotted out by dense exhalation from the land. Mist, soft and lapping as fleece, imprisoned them in sunless and unshadowing light—a light omnipresent, glaring and cheerless. Their cloaks wrapped them against the raw cold of it, against the wet ; Mabilla's hair, long since shaken loose from the bodkin that held it, sagged streaming about her shoulders ; time and again she shook them free from the clinging burden, which then lay in one heavy roll, lustrous as a ship's cable new hauled from the tideway. She was tired ; her skirt clung to her knees, hobbling her ; but her cheeks were as fresh as dewy roses, and her eyes sparkled like two mountain tarns under a windy sky. Light danced in them ; they sang, and they dared greatly toward the utter subjugation of Lanceilhot, now owned lord of her mind. He, good youth, under stress of his cares—conducting on a flight from

the Red Earl two fair women of his seraglio (and one the fairest woman under the sun)—had, for the moment, no eyes for the happy provocation alight in hers. He carried such garniture as they had snatched up ; he nosed for the way ; his ears were set back for pursuit. (There was none, and for reason good ; but he could not know that.) As for Nitidis, she had learned two things of life, to love and to plod. These two she did.

They climbed the long shoulder of a hill, once across which, said Lanceilhot, they would reach a deep and wooded valley, wherein lay the spring of the Lone, wheredown it began by racing its long journey to the middle shires. Their road would take them all its length, but in two days' time he hoped the river itself would carry them. Atop of the hill the woods began—pine woods, whose sighing invited them to rest. They reached the woods and found themselves above the fog bank, in the full splendour of the blue and gold. Mabilla bathed her face in the sun ; Nitidis sank into a heap upon the drying needles ; Lanceilhot, the poet turned man of action, produced bread, apples, and wine. He spread his cloak, spread the board and waited for his lady.

But she was at her prayers, at her secrets with the sun and the morning. Upon her glimmering eyes, upon her parting lips, upon her fair cheeks and glossy neck the glad light beat and played. There as he watched and loved her beauty, she threw back her clogging hair and with outlifted arms shed the cloak which dragged at her

shoulders. She stood up in Nitidis' blue frock, with her head thrown up to the sun, with her arms still open to receive him. The drawn raiment stretched at the brooch and Lanceilhot's eyes lost nothing. Like swelling buds that burst the sheath strained her two breasts at the cotton gown. But below them he remarked the broad girdle that she wore. It was of leather, much wrought with lacquered gold, with gold hammered clasps studded with rough cut jewels of great size. Emeralds it had, sapphires dark as a summer night, balass rubies, crystals, moonstones, yellow topaz. In and out of the set stones ran a rune in stitched lettering. No one could read it.

He stared, then pointed his finger. ‘Look, look, look ! she wears the girdle. The girdle of Renny ! So the rune is fulfilled.’

Mabilla looked down at her belt, pulling up the fullness of the gown that she might see it.

But Lanceilhot had turned to Nitidis. ‘Where got you that for your mistress ?’

Nitidis, with wide and truthful eyes, replied, ‘I was in the chamber making ready for my lady. There came in quietly a grey nun. I had seen but one such before in the house. She came in bearing in her two hands the belt, as the Mass priest goes to his altar in the morning carrying the chalice under a three-cornered veil. She brought it into the chamber and laid it with reverence its length upon a table that was there. Then she turned and with bent head went away. I looked, but dared not touch that thing. It spelled danger —like all that great house.’

'Where saw you another such woman, Nitidis?' Lanceilhot asked her.

The maid answered, 'I was, so please you, in the chapel, where Donna Sabine lay quiet.'

'What saw you, child?'

'I went to see that she lacked nothing. They had laid her there and covered her with a sheet. When I came into the chapel all the candles were about her alight and I saw a grey nun walk from the bier, with bent head and footfalls that made no noise. And then when I came to Donna Sabine I saw her covered with the great splashed robe, and I am sure that the nun had covered her with it.'

Mabilla had been listening, though her head had been hung, and she had fingered the jewels throughout. Now she lifted her eyes to Lanceilhot, but not her head.

'What was the rune?' she asked him.

He told her, 'It is the Rune of Renny. Have you never heard it? It goes thus—a childish thing, an old wife's rhyme—

When a martyr wears the Robe,
A virgin the Crown,
And the Girdle finds a middle,
Renny hath his own.

'Now I think that thus the wicked house will have peace, my dear. For Donna Sabine hath the robe, and your cousin, Donna Hold, still virgin, will have the crown, of your proud resigning. And you, fairest and holiest Renny, have given your sweet middle to the girdle. Now

then there will be an end of the blood lust, and God will enjoy His own again.'

Then he broke out into the third canzon of the song of Renny, which was the chaunt of the girdle :—

'Listen, the last of the lay !
The weird women, weary of working,
Fashioned the crown, Christ them forgive !
Wrought the robe, for the ruefullest Renny—
Blotted with blood. Tearful they turned
Eyes to the heights ; "Hear us, O Father,
Thou in Thy heaven ! Pride serve we, and tears ;
Never yet love." Then God gave the girdle
Into their hands ; "This for the breasts
Of her whose great heart, surging her soul stress,
Breaketh the bands."'

There he stopped, for Mabilla had unclasped the girdle and let it fall from her waist. She lifted Lanceilhot's arm by the hand and put it round her body. Then, glowing, she smiled into his face. 'I am Renny no more, Lanceilhot,' she said, 'but Mabilla thy love. This is the girdle I choose to wear.'

So he clasped her and fed her with kisses of his mouth.

EPILOGUE

I

To the noble lady, Mabilla Countess of Pikpoyntz, in Maintsonge, the King's city, in the Convent of the Sisters of Mount Grace.

Beloved sister and chieftain, by right of inheritance, of my wife's house, I greet you well. These are to instruct your ear that I received your good letter by the sure hand of Master Jocelyn, your messenger, and understand that you renounce this earthly crown of Renny for a heavenly and this broad fief of Coldscaur for one not supported by horses and arms. So it is, therefore, that my wife, your cousin Donna Hold, hath been served heir to Donna Sabine, her cousin, whom God assoil and hath been girt with the chain of Renny by the hands of my Lord John of Barsaunter, the King's brother, and done her fealty and service through me.

Not without stress of arms and certain bloodshed was this safely accomplished, for so it is that the Earl of Pikpoyntz, being there before me, did vehemently disdain the outlawry pronounced against him by our lord the King, and

resisted his Grace's lieutenant, my Lord Jervais de Bréauté, who nevertheless in battle prevailed against him and did hang upon a gallows that great murderer of your kindred, and afterwards, having cut off his head, did set that up on a pike, upon the tower of the great church of Renny-Helm, where it still remains, or some of it. Also a certain woman, named Blanchmains, being taken in a tavern in Caunce-Renny, and denounced by Shrike the Chamberlain, was burned in the market-place of that burgh—all but her two hands, which were nailed to the door of the same church of Renny-Helm.

These things done and the writ of outlawry returned, duly indorsed, into the King's exchequer, we entered in, with my lord the Earl of Hauterive and the Right Reverend Father in God and venerable man, the Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fé, your uncle—and were instituted guardians of the fief until your pleasure should be known. All these news I think it right to give you, my dearest sister, who are and ever shall be to our hearts and consciences truly and lawfully Renny of Coldscaur, and princess of these two shires of North and South Marvilion.

As for your county of Pikpoyntz and castle of Speir, they fall as escheat to the King, saving your widow estate. And so I take my leave of you, sister, kissing your feet and hands as becomes me.

Your brother, Bernart the Viscount, and, *jure uxoris*, Renny of Coldscaur. From Coldscaur, this twelfth of October,

II

To her dearest brother, Renny of Coldscaur,
Mabilla de Renny sends love and many kisses.

Neither with counties nor with fiefs will you tempt me from the way of happy life which I see before me, brother ; nor with pompous titles or cousinships to Our Lady the Virgin am I to be wooed from that which I covet most of any names given to women, namely, mistress, beloved, spouse, bed-fellow, and friend. For these endure, and the others perish. Yet you shall not suppose me a spouse of God, as you now seem to suppose ; for of heaven we know little and, maybe, expect too much ; and a wise friend of mine reminds me that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. I believe that he is very right, as well as having the authority of the Scripture upon his side to confirm him in that opinion.

Yet here in this quiet house of pious women, who hope the best of me, and here in this sunny garth where the apples are now mellowing to the harvest, I shall remain, repenting of my frowardness and folly until the feast of the Epiphany next to be, and then I become all those things I have learned to wish to be. For you are to know, brother, that I am greatly beloved, sought and desired by one to whom in my turn all my longing goes where my respect has gone before. He it was who opened my eyes to my exceeding foolishness, who guided my steps to this good place, who has approved himself to me as, first, my dearest

friend, as, second, my wisest counsellor, as, last, my only lord. He seeketh to have me his, and he shall have me, be sure—and so I serve out the conditions of the Rune of Renny, and as the martyr hath worn the Robe and a virgin the Crown, now the Girdle goes about my body. But it is not the girdle wrought by the grey women, but a better and stronger than that. So fare you well, dearest brother and lord, from your sister and servant, the happy, the desiring, the desired,

MABILLA.

I beg you to kiss for me my cousin Hold.
This should not be a task too hard for you.

From Mount-Grace in Maintsonge.

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